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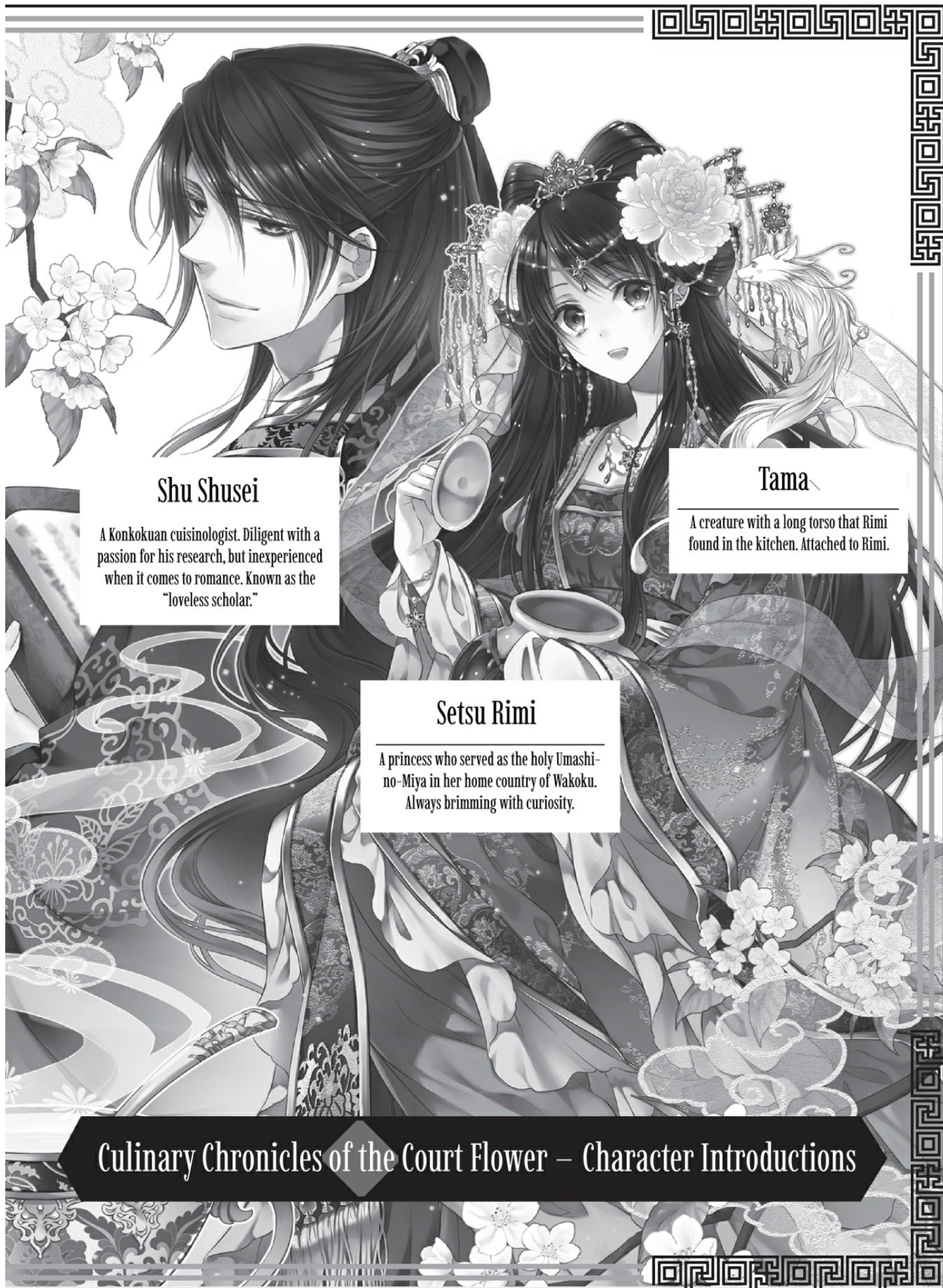


Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower

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Shu Shusei

A Konkokuan culinologist. Diligent with a passion for his research, but inexperienced when it comes to romance. Known as the "loveless scholar."

Tama

A creature with a long torso that Rimi found in the kitchen. Attached to Rimi.

Setsu Rimi

A princess who served as the holy Umashi-no-Miya in her home country of Wakoku. Always brimming with curiosity.

Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower – Character Introductions



Shin Jotetsu

A military officer who serves
as Shohi's bodyguard.



Sai Hakurei

An enchantingly beautiful eunuch.
Serves Shohi directly.



Ryo Shohi

The emperor of the great empire
of Konkoku. Cruel and heartless.

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It was their first time meeting. The older princess spoke to her wide-eyed seven-year-old sister.

“Listen well. The Umashi-no-Miya exists for no reason but to provide exquisite food to the god as well as me. Do you follow? You there, with the vacant expression of a bear cub who just woke from its winter hibernation.”

“Huh...really?”

Placing a finger on the tip of her perplexed sister’s nose, the princess, who was a decade older, continued, “That’s right. I’m a Saigu who serves Kunimamori-no-Ōkami, the protector of these lands. And you are the Umashi-no-Miya, who will serve the god and me. From now on, you will make food for the god, and after you have offered it, it will be my food to eat. That’s your duty and the reason you have come here. Are you capable of doing that?”

“What? ‘Duty’? It’s my duty?!” the younger princess, who up until now had seemed to be in a daze, exclaimed in excitement, leaning forward. “Um, in that case, Lady Saigu, if I’m able to make good food for you, will this be the place where I belong?”

“The place where you belong?”

“Up until now, everyone has always been at a loss as to what to do with me. ‘This princess has nowhere she belongs,’ they would say. Father and the handmaids always said it too. They were all at a loss. There was no place for me in the palace. But here I have a duty to fulfill, right? Does that mean if I make food you like, this will be where I belong?!” She spoke frantically and filled with expectation, but her voice betrayed a sense of desperation unbefitting of her young age.

Looking back at the young princess, the older sister seemed to have sensed something in her younger sister’s eyes, as she softened her voice.

“Yes, that’s right. If you’re able to make us exquisite food, this will be where you belong, Ayako.”

Upon hearing her sister say this, the young girl’s—Ayako’s—eyes burned even brighter.

“In that case, I promise to make food that the god and you will like!”

That was ten years ago. The conversation took place in Wakoku.

With no backing and no place for her in the imperial palace, the emperor’s ninth princess, Ayako, was given the duty of making food to offer the god, and become Ayako the Umashi-no-Miya. Ayako would never forget this day, a day she was truly happy.

However, ten years later, Ayako the Umashi-no-Miya would cross the sea to the mainland, where she would enter the rear palace of the great empire of Konkoku—as a tribute.

Chapter 1: A Lonely Wildflower in the Rear Palace

I

“Starting today, your name is Setsu Rimi.”

It had begun an hour earlier.

Ayako the Umashi-no-Miya had passed through the gate to the Konkoku rear palace. She had been ordered to change out of her clothes, and in place of her Wakokuan dress that consisted of layers upon layers of garments, she had been given a light ruqun.

She had been led to a hall decorated by vermillion pillars where several eunuchs waited. The eunuchs had then informed her of the new name that she would go by.

So my family name is “Setsu,” and my given name is “Rimi.”

She was surprised to have her name changed out of the blue, as easily as changing a house sign. However, though she was not yet comfortable with her new name, she was also surprised by how readily she accepted it.

In the end, even if you change a house sign, the building itself remains unchanged. The same was true of herself—though her new name was yet unfamiliar to her, she was still the same person she had always been.

Huh... I guess changing your name isn't really that big of a deal? She nodded, having arrived at a satisfactory conclusion in her head. Amused by her lack of particularity, her expression softened.

Upon seeing her amusement, the eunuchs grew suspicious.

“What is so funny?”

Since she was little, others had often complained about her carefree demeanor. Ayako—nay, Setsu Rimi—was reminded of this and hurriedly stiffened up.

“Nothing at all,” she replied in the Konkokuan she had spent close to a year studying in preparation for leaving for Konkoku. While her understanding of the spoken language was near-perfect, she still lacked the vocabulary to speak eloquently. She worried that this might lead to problems in the future.

“Starting today, you are a Konkokuan. Your rank is sixth—a Lady of Precious Bevy. A palace woman from the General Palace Service will show you the way from here.” As soon as the eunuch finished speaking, an elderly palace woman who had been waiting near the entrance to the hall swiftly approached Rimi.

“Right this way, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” the woman urged Rimi, who picked up a terracotta pot that she had placed by her feet and started walking. Upon seeing the pot, the woman’s face clouded over with suspicion. The eunuchs, who only now had noticed that Rimi had been carrying a pot, furrowed their brows as if to reproach her.

“Please wait, Lady Rimi. What is that you are carrying? Where did you get that?”

“From Wakoku. How come?”

“No clothing or accessories from any foreign country, including Wakoku, are allowed in the rear palace.”

“Oh, don’t worry. This is food. It tastes good. Want to see?” Rimi smiled softly as she placed the pot back down on the stone floor and opened the lid. The eunuchs and the palace woman warily peered into the pot.

“What in the world is this?” a eunuch asked incredulously. A glossy white substance filled the pot. Its texture was like that of fine mud. With a faintly sweet, mellow scent, it smelled of wine brewed from rice. It was a fine scent that would have attracted anyone who caught a whiff of it, though it must have been unfamiliar to the people of Konkoku.

It was a pickling bed called kaoridoko that was used to season food, resulting in something called kaorizuke.

I see...people from Konkoku don’t know about kaorizuke. In which case, they obviously wouldn’t know about kaoridoko either... Pickling...pickling bed? Wait, how do I describe this in Konkokuan? Rimi watched the eunuchs’ and palace

woman's reactions as she struggled to think of what to say.

"Unknown substances are not allowed in His Majesty the Emperor's rear palace. I am confiscating this," a eunuch said in a matter-of-fact tone. Rimi quickly put the lid back on the pot, picked it up, and cradled it in her arms.

"No! This is... This is... Something that smells nice and pressures the food!" Rimi attempted to describe it in what words she knew, but the eunuchs turned pale.

"Pressuring food? Pressuring someone is akin to threatening someone...could this be poison?!"

That had been Rimi's attempt at a translation. She was hoping that they would associate the imagery of something being held down with pickling, but it did not work out as expected. Frantic, she tried to find the right words.

"It's not poison! I said it wrong. Not pressure, it's...it's for burying!"

"Burying?! Do you mean to bury people?!"

Jumping to wild conclusions, the eunuch was startled further. Rimi wished she could reply with a "You can't be serious," but with her language skills, that was the least of her concerns.

"Not people. And you don't bury, you...you use a bed... Um, is bed the right word?"

"A bed? You do not mean to pour this all over His Majesty's bedding, do you?!"

"His Majesty? His Majesty has nothing to do with it. His Majesty's status in this case is belittled to an irrelevant person."

"Belittled?! What do you mean by irrelevant?!"

Rimi had tried to politely explain that the emperor was irrelevant to the matter at hand, but it seemed something had gone wrong.

I-I might be done for. Somehow, the more I try to explain, the worse things get...

She could feel cold sweat running down her back. She decided to give up on

explaining the finer details and instead attempted to convince them using simple words.

“Anyway, this...this isn’t poison. It’s safe. It’s food. If I can’t have this, I won’t enter the rear palace.”

“Then please explain what it is, Lady Rimi.”

“As I said, um...it’s food. It’s not poison. It’s not dangerous. It’s food.” As Rimi repeated herself, she could hear a eunuch whisper to another, seemingly high-ranked, eunuch.

“We should send for an interpreter,” it sounded like he said. The high-ranked eunuch nodded in agreement, a troubled expression on his face.

Feeling the gazes of the palace woman and the eunuchs, Rimi held on to the pot as if to say, “You can have it over my dead body.”

What do I do if they take it? If I lose this, I’ll never find more as long as I’m in Konkoku.

Bringing the pot all the way here from Wakoku had been an ordeal. During the seven-day voyage by sea, she had worked hard to ensure that the pot wouldn’t break from the rocking of the boat.

She’d had her name replaced as easily as changing a house sign. That much she could accept. Even if her name changed, the unshakeable building that was herself would not collapse. But the pillar that supported that unshakeable building was food—and that was the only pillar that supported her.

After waiting for who knows how long in that slightly tense hall, a young man appeared. He seemed to be just slightly over twenty years of age, with a tall and slender physique. His eyes were unusually calm considering his age. The eunuchs drew close to the man.

Huh? An interpreter? The eunuchs are acting awfully humble for that to be the case.

While being briefed by the eunuchs at a rapid speed, the man approached Rimi. He must have been summoned on short notice—it was clear that he was rather confused.

“The eunuchs asked me to have you explain the situation,” the man spoke in fluent Wakokuan. With joy building up in her chest upon hearing this, Rimi replied excitedly.

“Are you from Wakoku?!”

“No, I am from Konkoku. I learned Wakokuan as part of my education. You are the Wakokuan princess, correct? I believe your name was Setsu Rimi. Rimi, are you aware that foreign clothing and accessories cannot be brought into the Konkoku rear palace?” The man spoke softly, not to condemn her, but to gently persuade her.

“I am aware. However, this is neither clothing nor an accessory, nor is it an unknown dangerous substance. It is food. I was told that bringing in food is allowed.”

“Yes, I heard from the eunuchs that you insist that is food. However, they claim that they cannot fathom how that could possibly be true.”

“Please have a look, then,” Rimi said, as she crouched down to place the pot on the floor and once again removed its lid. “Are you familiar with Wakokuan kaorizuke?”

“Kaori...zuke?”

“You pickle food such as vegetables, fish, and meat in a mixture containing ingredients like salt and miso.”

“Oh, yes, I have heard it’s common in Wakoku. So this is the famed tsukemono?” The man peered into the pot with intense curiosity.

“No, this is kaoridoko, which is a pickling bed used to make kaorizuke. If you put food in here and let it sit for a few days, it ends up tasting great.”

“What is this bed made of?”

“It’s made from the dregs that result from brewing rice wine. The only ingredients are rice and water, so there’s nothing dangerous about it. You could even eat it if you really wanted to.”

“Well, as far as I can see, the eunuchs were certainly overreacting. But I must ask, is this really important enough to bring all the way from Wakoku and throw

a tantrum over just because you can't bring it into the rear palace?"

"It's important to me. Very much so," Rimi replied, with her gaze fixed on the man. "So important that if I cannot bring it into the rear palace, I would rather shove my head into the pot and drown myself on the spot."

"I see. So very important indeed, in other words." The man met Rimi's ardent gaze and nodded. "That's a rather novel method of taking your life that you've thought up there, and I am loath to miss out on getting to witness it, but very well. If you are that insistent...I will eat it."

The man suddenly put a finger in the glossy, white pickling bed and licked it.



What?! He ate it!

The nearby eunuchs and the woman shouted and spoke all at once in a frenzy.

“That’s dangerous!”

“Have you gone mad?”

However, the man remained calm. After tasting it, he made a face as though he had just heard an inane joke, and he faintly smiled.

“There is no need to worry. Making a fuss about this is just a waste of time. This would seem to be some sort of fermented rice product. It can be brought into the rear palace without issue. It is no different from enjoying a rare foreign tea in the rear palace.”

“But we cannot very well bring an unknown substance into His Majesty’s rear palace...” The eunuchs looked at each other, still unconvinced. The man smiled gently in return as if to say “Oh, what will I do with you.” His smile made the eunuchs flustered.

“I will vouch that it is harmless. If there is any problem, simply mention my name. I will take responsibility for it.”

As though compelled by his smile, the eunuchs finally agreed with a “Very well, in that case...”

The man turned back to Rimi and once again spoke to her in Wakokuan.

“They agreed to let you bring that pot into the rear palace.”

“You managed to convince them?!” Rimi asked, surprised. The man reached out to take Rimi’s hand and helped her to her feet.

“Please stand. You are soon to be a woman of the Konkoku rear palace. You must behave elegantly. You must never again crouch down on the floor.”

Rimi looked up at the tall man. She could see herself reflected in his perceptive eyes.

“Take good care of that food of yours from your homeland,” he said sympathetically. He then turned around and left the hall.

His voice... Oh, what a kind voice... Speechless, Rimi watched the man leave while a warm feeling slowly filled her chest.

When Rimi had arrived in Konkoku earlier, her attendants had quickly bid her farewell. The Konkokuan officials had all been cold and indifferent and had shown her to the rear palace in a dispassionate manner. Even Rimi, with her carefree demeanor, had felt somewhat anxious surrounded by foreign buildings and people speaking a foreign language. The prospect of having her kaoridoko confiscated had made her even more worried.

Amid her hopelessness, those were the first words of kindness that anyone from Konkoku had spoken to her.

“Very well. We permit you to bring that into the rear palace,” the eunuchs agreed reluctantly, waving at her as though to tell her to hurry up.

Rimi placed a hand on her chest in relief, bowed slightly in gratitude, and started following the palace woman out of the hall. It was only then that she realized she had not expressed any words of gratitude to the Wakokuan-speaking young man. She stopped in her tracks and turned back to the eunuchs.

“Excuse me! Who was that gentleman just now? I would like to express my gratitude to him.”

“He is the finest scholar in Konkoku. We were unable to find an interpreter and had to instead make a special request for his assistance. He is not someone a woman of the rear palace like you would normally meet face-to-face. You will most likely never see him again,” a eunuch replied bluntly, commanding her to hurry up and leave with a cold wave of his hand.

II

Rimi pondered just who that Wakokuan-speaking man was. Disappointed she hadn't even learned his name, she followed the palace woman out of the hall. The harshness of the winter having abated, she was greeted by rays of sunlight just warm enough for a slight smile to surface on her face.

This Konkokuan outfit is so light. The skirt feels so empty. Through the bottom of the unfamiliar skirt, a chilly spring breeze entered and caressed her skin.

Even so, the ruqun was comfortable to wear, and she was fond of how light it was.

However, she still felt isolated. Despite the palace woman walking right in front of her, she felt like a lone leaf floating in the middle of a vast ocean. But she soon shook her head, as if to drive away all her loneliness. She clutched her pot even more tightly.

I'll be fine, as long as I have this. Embracing the pot felt to her as if she were embracing her entire home country. It gave her confidence.

They walked down a slightly breezy cloister, toward what appeared to be the front garden of the rear palace. In the middle of the garden stood a large stone lantern on a foundation of white stone. Further down was a gate leading to the innermost area. As she passed through the gate, the woman serving as Rimi's guide started speaking.

"Now we are truly in the rear palace. Men are still allowed as long as they are officials between here and the outer gate. However, beyond this gate, the only man who can enter is His Majesty the Emperor. In this part of the rear palace live one thousand five hundred consorts, concubines, handmaids, eunuchs, and servants, and there are over a hundred buildings."

The scale of the rear palace was beyond belief. Extending straight ahead from the inner gate was a stone-paved path wide enough for a carriage to pass by with stone walls that seemed to continue endlessly on both sides. Decorating the interior of the walls were sloped roofs with prominent vermilion rafters. Canting from the ridge of the roofs were corners that elegantly arched upwards.

It was a rear palace befitting a great empire that spanned half the continent. Coming from a small island nation, Rimi could hardly believe that this place had been constructed for the sake of a single emperor.

No wonder Wakoku has to act subservient to Konkoku, she thought. Even a single rear palace was on a completely different magnitude from anything she had seen before. If such a great nation were to attack, Rimi's home country of Wakoku would not have stood a chance. Being a tributary state subservient to Konkoku was the only path forward for Wakoku.

That's why I was sent here. As a symbol of subservience.

The wind blew down the path from the opposite direction, rattling the jade buyao ornament in her hair and causing the bottom of her skirt to flutter before dying down. Standing in front of such a vast rear palace, she realized the significance of the fact that she was about to enter this place herself, with a completely new name at that.

It was the year 111 of the Konkoku calendar. Konkoku's fifth emperor had ascended to the throne. With the coronation of a new emperor, it was tradition to do away with the old consorts and concubines and replace them. As a symbol of subservience, vassal states would, along with celebratory gifts for the new emperor, offer up one of their own princesses to join Konkoku's rear palace as a consort. Put simply, the princesses were tributes.

And the princess sent as a tribute from Wakoku was Rimi.

As Rimi passed through the inner gate, the palace woman stopped, looking back ever so slightly. A derisive smile could be seen on her face.

"Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. Oh, how sad. You, a noble princess, have come all the way here from beyond the sea, only to become a palace woman."

Excluding the empress, there were 120 consorts and concubines in the palace. However, out of these, only the forty highest-ranked ones were treated as the emperor's wives. Those ranked below were concubines only in name and were expected to work as palace women.

The rank Rimi had been given, Lady of Precious Bevy, was ranked just below the forty highest-ranked women. It was the highest rank a palace woman could have.

However, ultimately, she was still a mere palace woman.

While it was clear that she was being treated with disrespect, being from the powerless nation of Wakoku, it was to be expected. The most powerful merchants of Konkoku had far more influence than Wakoku in Konkoku's imperial court.

The guide's sarcastic remark must have been an attempt to ridicule her over this fact, but Rimi was not particularly bothered. In Wakoku, her contact with

others had been extremely limited. Avoiding contact with others had been part of her duty as the Umashi-no-Miya. As a result, the woman's sarcasm only felt new and refreshing to her.

I wonder, would becoming a high-ranking palace woman count as rising up in the world for me?

She looked up at the open sky. Unlike the mountainous Wakoku, Konkoku had an unfathomably large plain, resulting in a far more open and wide sky. She thought that this pale, cloudless spring sky must have continued all the way to Wakoku.

I may have been a princess with the title Umashi-no-Miya, but in practice, I was little more than a cook. So perhaps it does count as a promotion?

She thought back to her older sister, far away in Wakoku. Her sister was a Saigu, a shrine maiden who served Kunimamori-no-Ōkami. The only person Rimi would see every day was the Saigu, who was also the only contact she had with anyone else in general. As a result, whenever she thought back to her home country, she was inevitably reminded of her sister.

Her memories of her home country were almost completely occupied by her sister and by food.

I wonder, is Lady Saigu happily throwing her usual tantrum today? Is she complaining about her food as always?

When she thought back to her Saigu sister raising hell with her beautiful face and kicking over a dining table while clad in a gorgeous outfit, Rimi reflexively let out a chuckle. The palace woman looked displeased, seemingly finding Rimi's laugh eerie.

Her sister would often complain about her carefree demeanor. However, here that disposition of hers might be a blessing in disguise.

What waits for me in the rear palace? Living alongside her anxiousness was her curiosity. During her ten years as the Umashi-no-Miya, she had spent her life like a bird in a cage. Because of this, everything she saw of the outside world interested her. Not to mention that this was a foreign country—there were new sights to be found everywhere.

Perhaps Rimi would be able to enjoy the uneasiness and anxiety of joining a foreign rear palace. Guided by her curiosity, she spurred herself on.

“I suppose you’ll be able to find all sorts of delicious food in that empire they call Konkoku, so I’m sure you’ll enjoy life there. What a pity that you’ll never come home to Wakoku again, but do enjoy it there enough for the both of us. And why don’t you send me letters while you’re at it? I might even read them if I’m bored. I shan’t be sending any back, though.” Her sister’s sarcastic parting words played back in her head, and she responded in her mind.

Lady Saigu, I will be sure to enjoy everything here. For starters, a palace woman making sarcastic remarks to me was a very new experience. I would say there’s a rather charming tension between the two of us.

On the mainland, even the scent of the air differed. The dry, sand-filled wind seemed to carry a scent akin to a slightly sweet and invigorating spice.

What kinds of food will I find in this country? And...will I be able to find a place where I belong here? Like I did back when I was seven?

For the past ten years, Rimi had fulfilled the duty given to her as the Umashi-no-Miya. Every day, she had made food, and after offering it to the god, she would give it to her Saigu sister to eat. Her sister had an almost brilliant beauty to her, befitting an emissary of a god. She was also a temperamental glutton and miserly when it came to praising food. Rimi had spent every day thinking about how to make food that even her sister would think tasted good. That was her duty, her job, her only role in life, her one pleasure—as well as her way to gain a place where she belonged.

Compared to the other princesses, who were like large, beautiful flowers assembled in Konkoku’s rear palace, Rimi was not even worth admiring. She was, at most, worth about as much as a puny wildflower. She did not have a beautiful singing voice, nor was she good at dancing or playing instruments. The only thing the former Umashi-no-Miya was capable of was making food for someone.

But still, if she could only find someone here who would enjoy the food she made, perhaps Rimi could find a new place to belong. Even in this faraway foreign land where everything was different from what she knew.

III

The palace housing the residence Rimi had been given was called the Palace of Small Wings. It contained nine residences—each consisting of a living room and a bedroom—which were all reserved for palace women of the rank Lady of Precious Bevy.

Rimi walked down a cloister while observing the reliefs carved into the wooden beams above her. They depicted gods frolicking in a valley. Up until a century ago, both gods and divine beasts had routinely shown up in the realm of humans. However, as the ages passed, they had gradually started to disappear. Now they were a rare sight.

Rimi herself had only seen one once: a white dragon. It had looked like a white thread, twisting its body as it slowly made its way over the heavens. It had been so far away that if not for her Saigu sister telling her that it was a dragon, she would likely have missed it completely.

Oh yeah, I did hear that the reason Konkoku was able to grow this big was thanks to the protection of a divine dragon. And that the emperor of Konkoku is supposedly still living alongside that dragon.

As she strolled mindlessly, a hostile voice struck her back.

“Lady Rimi, please hurry. If you don’t make it on time, I will lose face,” called the voice of the old handmaid who had been assigned to Rimi. She had a sort of refined, spiteful look in her eyes that came with old age.

“I’m sorry,” Rimi apologized and increased her pace. The old handmaid let out a deliberately audible sigh.

“Honestly, some foreign girl as a Lady of Precious Bevy? Now that’s a mismatch in status if I’ve ever seen one.”

It had been three days since Rimi had moved into the Palace of Small Wings. She had spent these days listening to the old handmaid’s snide remarks. She would turn these remarks over in her mind but found that no matter how snide the remark, as long as it was uttered in Konkokuan, it didn’t affect her much. It seemed as though during the extra time it took for her to translate it in her head, she had already calmed down.

Either way, I need to hurry. If I really am late, I'll be in trouble.

His Majesty the Emperor was scheduled to visit the rear palace soon. The 120 consorts and concubines of the rear palace had been assembled, and they needed to gather all at once to present themselves to the emperor.

The location of the gathering was the front garden that Rimi had quickly passed by three days ago. In the middle of the front garden, located between the inner and the outer gates, was an enormous lantern, surrounded by white stone flooring. The consorts and concubines were to line up by rank in the front garden, starting from the north side. Rimi was instructed to stand slightly north of the middle of the garden.

The emperor was scheduled to appear in front of the inner gate. Rimi pondered just what this emperor—a man who ruled over a great empire and was said to live alongside a divine dragon, even in this godless age—might look like. It was said that the young emperor was a mere sixteen years of age—one year younger than Rimi.

I don't suppose the man from the other day is here? She saw aides in the cloister leading to the outer gate. She was searching to see if any of them were the man who had been kind to her when she first arrived.

She searched so fervently that she accidentally made eye contact with one of the military officers. He was a well-built man, equipped with a wide sword, and had a somewhat uncouth appearance. He smiled at Rimi.

Oh no, I looked around too much, Rimi thought as she hurriedly looked away.

“His Majesty the Emperor has arrived,” a eunuch with a bright voice proclaimed, and the consorts and concubines knelt all at once. Rimi followed suit.

Ruqun sleeves and skirts, along with soft shawls, were spread out over the stone flooring. The beautiful sight of the 120 consorts and concubines kneeling and bending down on top of the white stone in the garden was like countless colorful flower petals being scattered.

“Raise your heads,” a young voice commanded. The women all looked up in unison and stood speechless. The emperor who stood in front of the inner gate

had a vigorous, youthful beauty to him, like freshly budded leaves wet from the morning dew.

A silver dragon stretched from his right shoulder, across his back, and to his left sleeve. It was delicate embroidery made from silver thread. His formal outfit had purple embroidery attached to it so deep that it could be mistaken for black. This noble, deep color cast a shadow upon his vigorous beauty, but that contrast only served to further emphasize his magnificence.

This is the fifth emperor of Konkoku—Ryu Shohi.

Stunned at first by the beauty of the emperor, Rimi noticed after a while his oddly piercing gaze. But despite being a year younger than Rimi, his dark, piercing gaze had no hint of the rashness or mischievousness one would have expected from someone his age. However, he did not seem relaxed. Rather, he was akin to a wary, fierce beast. Rimi felt a chill go down her spine.

Shohi looked down at his consorts and concubines lined up on the ground when the Noble Consort at the very front looked up. She was about thirteen or fourteen years of age, a charming consort whose mouth and eyes still betrayed her youth. The floral design adorning her hair of an early-blooming peony shook as the Noble Consort tilted her head slightly and smiled. While wearing an innocent expression, her smile seemed to radiate a sort of sweetness, suggesting that she was already fully aware of her power as a woman.

“I am So Reiki. On behalf of the rear palace, I present myself to Your Majesty.”

With no empress present, the most powerful women in the rear palace were the four consorts: the Noble Consort, the Pure Consort, the Virtuous Consort, and the Worthy Consort. Currently, Noble Consort So had the most authority out of anyone in the rear palace and therefore was a likely candidate to be the next empress. Out of confidence stemming from this fact, or perhaps because of her youth, Noble Consort So smiled in a friendly manner as she continued speaking in an affected, cutesy voice.

“I feel truly blessed to meet Your Majesty. I have been lonely beyond words. Unlike my estate, in the rear palace there reside savages from vassal states, and I have been oh so frightened. But if it means that I can meet with Your Majesty, I think I can endure.”

It was plain as day that the savage mentioned was Rimi, who felt she had been insulted. However, in all likelihood, Noble Consort So had simply used Rimi to get across her anxiousness and cling to Shohi.

Shohi listened emotionlessly to what Noble Consort So had to say. After staring down at her for a while, he approached the Noble Consort, who was awaiting his response with a smile on her face. Stopping in front of her, he bent forward. His eyes, adorned with well-defined double eyelids, observed her. His thick eyelashes were long enough to cast shadows on his cheeks.

“Noble Consort So,” he said with a voice as clear as a limpid stream.

To which she responded, “Yes?”

“Do you understand that the four consorts have a duty to rule the rear palace in a way as to ensure it operates smoothly and is free of conflict?”

“Of course, Your Majesty, I believe that to be an obvious...” Noble Consort So’s voice trailed off, and the onlookers grew restless. Rimi’s jaw dropped as she watched the scene unfold.

Shohi was holding Noble Consort So’s chin firmly with one hand, using such force that his fingers dug into her cheeks, leaving So with her mouth half-open, unable to move. Her eyes shook from both surprise and fear.

“If you are truly aware that it is your duty to ensure that the rear palace can operate smoothly and free of conflict, then are you a simpleton, Noble Consort So?” Shohi asked, emotionless. “Someone whose duty is to prevent conflict would dare to disparage others, sowing the seeds of conflict herself? Your tongue seems to have a life of its own. I foresee it being the cause of much disaster. What would you say if I cut off that tongue of yours, right here and now?”

Noble Consort So, tears welling up in her eyes, desperately tried to shake her head from side to side. However, Shohi’s grip on her chin was much too firm, and she only looked to be struggling in vain.

“Your Majesty, I think that’s quite enough.” While everyone else was at a loss for what to do, a young military officer had slowly approached Shohi from behind and raised his voice to intervene. On his waist hung a wide sword. It was

the same military officer who Rimi had made eye contact with earlier. Given that he could address the emperor directly, he must have been a considerably high-ranking officer.

“You do not seriously mean to cut off the tongue of the Noble Consort, do you?” the officer continued.

“Indeed I do.”

“My, Your Majesty, how frightening you are,” the officer said, shivering in jest. Immediately after, though, his voice suddenly turned deep and ominous. “However, I cannot very well let you go through with that yourself. If you so wish, I, Shin Jotetsu, shall do it in your place.”

Upon hearing this, Shohi, seemingly having lost interest, scoffed, “Have the eunuchs assembled nothing but simpletons in my rear palace?” He loosened his grip, pushing So away. The Noble Consort fell to the ground and started crying, her face turned toward the ground.

“I’m leaving.” Taking no notice of the dumbfounded eunuchs and palace women, the terrified consorts and concubines, nor the bawling Noble Consort So, Shohi turned on his heels. The military officer, Shin Jotetsu, who was so composed that he seemed ready to start humming at any moment, followed him. The eunuchs also hurriedly chased after him.

The front garden was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop, the only sound being the sobbing of Noble Consort So. Until the emperor had disappeared from view, no concubine moved a single finger. They couldn’t move, having been dominated by fear.

The high-ranking consorts seemed particularly terrified at having joined the rear palace of such a frightening emperor. The higher one’s rank, the more often one was expected to serve the emperor. The consorts had all grown pale.

Wow... What a violent emperor. He seemed half-serious when he said he’d cut off her tongue.

He was the emperor of a great empire whose territory spanned half a continent and subjugated a vast number of vassal states. Any luxury he wished for was his—as demonstrated by his having been granted 120 consorts and

concubines at such a young age. If he so wished, he could sleep with any beautiful princess, dine on any lavish cuisine, and wear any magnificent clothing in the world.

And yet, he doesn't seem remotely happy. I wonder why? As surprised as Rimi was at the emperor's behavior, she was also perplexed. *Well, whatever. It's not like I'll ever have anything to do with His Majesty.*

After all, there were as many as forty higher-ranking consorts and concubines above her. The chances of the emperor taking notice of her were minuscule, an optimistic Rimi concluded.

However, she was yet unaware that the emperor merely taking notice of her would be the least of her worries.

Chapter 2: The Beautiful Eunuch

I

“Huh... is that so?”

It was the evening of the day that the emperor had first appeared before his concubines. Upon returning to her room, Rimi had found a piece of paper, upon which a good number of unfamiliar words were written. After spending a while decoding the message, putting to good use a self-made glossary that the Wakokuan interpreter had entrusted her with, she was finally able to understand what it said.

“‘You lowly, foreign woman. You filthy prostitute. Having your head cut off by His Majesty’s holy sword would be a fitting end for someone like you,’ I believe, or something to that effect.” She read it out loud, with a mixed sense of achievement and disappointment. The message consisted almost completely of dirty slang words. Words like these would not be found in a normal Konkoku book, so the interpreter’s glossary had come in handy.

When the interpreter handed Rimi the glossary, he had said, “I’m sure this will be of good use to you.” Rimi figured that he must have been a rather shrewd individual with a good idea of what the rear palace of Konkoku was like.

Before Rimi joined the rear palace, she had envisioned what life here might be like. Her predictions had turned out to be alarmingly accurate. She may have been just one concubine among 120, but as people gossiped about the princess from Wakoku, it had become difficult *not* to stand out. Not to mention, it was obvious that Rimi had no intimidating people backing her and her rank was a mere Lady of Precious Bevy—a palace woman. For both Noble Consort So and whoever threw this piece of paper into Rimi’s room, Rimi was the perfect target for belittlement and stress relief.

For Rimi, who was used to living like a bird in a cage, even harassment could be entertaining, as long as there was some amount of unpredictability to it, or if

there were discoveries that could be made. However, so far the unpredictability had been nonexistent.

“Though I suppose overly creative bullying would be a pain in its own way,” Rimi muttered. She held the paper up against the fire of a candle to burn it, stood up from her desk, and sat down by the table. Her supper, which the old handmaid had brought her a moment ago, was sitting on the table, soft steam rising from it. The meal consisted of stir-fried vegetables and meat covered in a thick sauce with a sweet and sour scent. Rimi picked up her chopsticks and started eating.

She took one bite, then another. However, she soon put her chopsticks down again and sighed.

“I still can’t taste anything... Is something wrong with me? I don’t get it...” She was completely unable to taste the food, and not only this meal—all food she had eaten since she joined the rear palace had tasted like nothing to her. Something was strange with her sense of taste.

She had been almost wholly unaware of her feelings of loneliness and carefree demeanor. Whenever any such feelings were close to surfacing, she would force them back down. However, in the end, she was only human, and deep down, those feelings had been growing steadily. Perhaps this was what had caused her failing sense of taste. *Who knew that even I, who always got scolded by Lady Saigu for my carefree demeanor, could end up like this.*

She had been looking forward to seeing what Konkokuan food was like, but how was she supposed to enjoy this foreign cuisine when she was unable to even taste it? And worst of all, with her sense of taste gone, she was unable to exert her one redeeming feature—her skill as a cook.

“Well, not that there’s anyone here to eat what I make anyway...”

Feeling miserable, in part from her loneliness from having come to a foreign country all by herself, and in part from how uncomfortable she was feeling where she had now found herself, she let out a deep sigh. The chair she was sitting in, the room she was in, everything felt so distant to her, as if they were refusing to accept her.

“It seems I’m without a place in the world once again. After all, there’s no

Lady Saigu here to enjoy the food I make.” Though she was making sure not to speak Wakokuan out loud, she felt no closer to fitting in at Konkoku.

No, this won't do. I have to make the best of my situation. Oh yes, I know! She pushed away the feelings bubbling up in her chest, put her chopsticks on the table, stood up, and headed to her bedroom.

On that night three days ago, when Rimi had first noticed that something was wrong with her sense of taste, she had attempted a certain experiment. She had grabbed the small terracotta pot standing in the corner of the room that she'd brought with her from Wakoku. As she had opened the lid, a pleasant smell had risen from the pot—the sweet, rich fragrance reminiscent of rice wine.

“What a lovely, mellow scent.” She had filled her lungs with the smell, then had put her hands into the pot and felt around. From the thick, glossy, and white pickling bed, she had pulled out a small spring melon split in two. It had lost a slight amount of water, but its light green color, reminiscent of fine jade, was still intact. Rimi had wrapped the melon in paper and headed to the kitchen on light feet.

The servants who were working in the kitchen had seemed surprised at Rimi's sudden appearance. The kitchen was not a place usually frequented by high-ranking palace women. However, when Rimi had politely asked them to cut the melon into thin pieces, they had skillfully complied. She had placed the thin pieces of jade-colored melon on a small porcelain plate and returned to her residence. She had pushed aside the food on the table, taken a piece of melon from the porcelain plate, and put it in her mouth.

She could sense the faint, sweet scent of rice wine, as she had bit down on the familiar, crunchy yet soft melon. She then took a sip of hot water. As the water slid down her throat, she could smell a pleasing scent, and suddenly even the hot water seemed to taste good.

“I can taste this.” Rimi had blinked a few times in surprise, after which a relieved smile emerged on her face, and she had put another slice in her mouth. Having been unable to taste anything as of late, the ability to enjoy this taste had calmed her mind.

Rimi liked to eat. As long as she could eat to her heart's content, no matter how miserable a situation she found herself in, she never felt miserable herself. As long as her stomach swelled, she could feel a warm power well up from within her. Perhaps this was an animal instinct.

"Wait, could it be..." An idea had come to her, and she had reached out her hand to try a bite of the Konkoku food. As she did, a faint taste of salt filled her mouth.

It seems that if I eat kaorizuke, my sense of taste comes back, if only a little. If I eat kaorizuke every day from now on, perhaps I'll be able to taste food properly at some point. She had felt relieved at the possibility. Right now, Rimi had no one to cook for. However, as long as her sense of taste came back, she would be able to make food, and things wouldn't seem so bleak.

At seven years of age, Rimi had managed to find a place for herself with the help of cooking. *It must be possible to do the same here in Konkoku,* she thought. Her optimism came from the pillar supporting her, a pillar she had spent ten long years as an Umashi-no-Miya constructing. As long as she had that pillar, Rimi could feel at ease.

Perhaps one day, someone would appear before Rimi to eat and enjoy the food she made. If her sense of taste did not work then, it would all be for naught. Rimi could not be without her sense of taste. Thus, she would have to put the kaorizuke to good use.

She felt immense gratitude toward the man who had been kind to her the day she first entered the rear palace, who had ensured that she did not have to part with her kaoridoko. He was still the only person in Konkoku who had been kind to her.

I wish I could see him again. She somehow missed that man, whose name she did not even know.

"If you aren't eating your food, I will remove it," the old handmaid who had just entered said irritably, reaching out toward the plate. She then noticed the porcelain plate near Rimi and made an expression like she had just spotted an insect. "What in the world is that?"

"Would you like some? I made it with that pot."

“Oh, dear heavens, no. I heard you brought a pot containing an unknown substance with you upon entering the rear palace, enraging the eunuchs.”

“But I did get permission. How sad that you aren’t having any. Eating this is good for your skin, you know.”

“What?!”

The old handmaid had instinctively reached out for the melon, but Rimi had just put the last piece in her mouth. Rimi apologized with an “Oh, I’m sorry,” but the handmaid only stared back at her bitterly.

“If nothing else, your skin certainly is beautiful, Lady Rimi. But I can’t imagine that eating something like that would be good for your skin.”

Rimi had been given the family name Setsu, meaning snow. From what she had heard, the name came from how fair her skin was. And her skin was indeed beautiful. Her fine cheeks were smooth, yet bouncy—reminiscent of soft, smooth mochi.

It was said that eating kaorizuke made your skin beautiful, thanks to the spirits that lived in the kaoridoko cleansing your body. As your body is cleansed by the spirits, the effects gradually show on your skin. As the spirits disliked fire, they would disappear if the kaoridoko was heated.

“Don’t break the pot. If you do, I might kill you a bit.”

“K-Kill me?!”

“Oh, is ‘kill’ wrong? Um... Was it ‘whack,’ maybe...?” She was trying to say that if the handmaid broke the pot, Rimi might not be able to forgive her, but apparently, she had used the wrong word.

“I say, do stop with those frightening threats. Not to worry, considering Master Shusei gave you permission, I shan’t throw it away.”

Rimi had jumped up from her chair as she heard what the old handmaid said and hurriedly asked her for clarification.

“Wait, what was that? What did you just say?”

“I said I shan’t throw it away.”

“No, no! Something about permission. Permission? Whose permission? You said a name!”

“Are you referring to Master Shusei?”

“Yes, him! Tell me his full name! Who is he?!”

She was sure it must be the name of the man that the eunuchs had refused to tell her.

“My, you don’t know about Master Shu Shusei, even though you received permission directly from him? I’m astonished.”

“So his name is Master Shu Shusei? Tell me about him. Who is he?”

“He is an imperial appointee working for the Bureau of Sacrifices in the Ministry of Rites and a cuisinologist.”

“Cuisinologist? What’s that?”

“Cuisinology is a new field of science, which concerns food.”

“Food science?! There’s a science about food?! And Master Shusei is a scholar in it?!” Rimi’s voice did a triple jump out of surprise. The handmaid had seemed to surmise something from Rimi’s reaction and made a sardonic face.

“Master Shusei is treated as highly as a vice-minister of fourth rank. Not to mention, he has accompanied His Majesty in both his studies and play since they were young and advises him as grand councilor. His father, you see, is Chancellor Shu, who has served the Imperial Court since the previous emperor, and Master Shusei is set to become Chancellor one day himself. It does not matter how much you plead—he is not a man that someone of your status can associate with.”

“He advises His Majesty? Yet he’s a cuisinologist?”

“Master Shusei stubbornly professes to have no interest in politics and instead wishes to pursue his research in cuisinology. However, most believe that His Majesty plans to promote him to chancellor at some point.”

So he’s a very high-ranking individual...but I still want to see him... Rimi thought, as if to cherish the small light that had lit up in her chest.

Master Shu Shusei, a cuisinologist... It was late at night, and Rimi was heading to the kitchen holding a candlestick in her hand while thinking about Shusei. She put some kaorizuke in her mouth and felt her sense of taste returning ever so slightly. If she continued eating kaorizuke every day like this, she was sure that her sense of taste would be back before long. So, she needed to make even more.

When she reached the kitchen, it was already too late in the day, so not a single person was present, nor any fire lit. As she peeked through the entrance to decide what to do, she heard a man's high-pitched voice behind her.

"What are you doing?"

She turned around to find the eunuch in charge of the kitchen. The eunuch brought his candlestick closer to Rimi to get a better look at her face and made a startled expression.

When Rimi asked to have some of the kitchen's vegetables, the eunuch, seemingly not having the patience to lecture her, simply shrugged his shoulders and said, "Here you go, take however much you need," and went off. Having received permission, Rimi stepped onto the cool earthen floor of the kitchen.

Near the back of the kitchen, there was a bamboo basket big enough to fit a person, containing vegetables. She walked toward it, lighting her way with her candle. She then placed the candlestick on a candle holder carved out from a pillar and removed the bamboo basket's lid.

She dove into the basket, rummaging through the vegetables. She was hoping to find a spring melon—a small, jade-colored melon, which was perfect for pickling. With nothing to guide her in the darkness but her sense of touch, she dug through the bamboo basket and managed to find three spring melons. As she continued her search, she suddenly grabbed something soft and fluffy.

Soft? Fluffy...?

Wondering what kind of vegetable could have this strange texture, she pulled it out. It turned out to be an animal, small enough to fit in two hands. It was long, furry, had four legs, and a long tail. Its ears were small and pointed, and between them were two small, hard bumps.

This doesn't look like any vegetable I've ever seen. Is this some kind of...long mouse?

She had seen pictures of long foreign dogs before. But this animal was awfully small to be a dog. It was long-haired with silver fur. Considering it was going through the vegetables, it must have been some kind of rare Konkokuan mouse, she reasoned.

She tried petting it on its soft back, and as she did, it let out a small squeak and opened its eyes. It blinked its round, blue eyes a few times, before looking up at Rimi. Rimi's heart skipped a beat at the mouse's adorable eyes. It seemed very weak and did not even attempt to escape Rimi's hands. The way it looked around restlessly with its round eyes made it seem all the more helpless and endearing.

It's so cute... Maybe I'll just keep it. She wanted to nurse it back to health and then set it free once it was feeling well again. Taking care of a mouse this cute would give her life here some meaning again, she felt.

Compared to the irises and peonies that were the high-ranking consorts, Rimi was but a wildflower, brought to the rear palace from a foreign country far away. A single lonely, helpless, foreign flower who had been sent here all by herself. There were no flowers here that bloomed with the same color as her. However, even a lonely flower blooming in the wild should be able to find a way to entertain herself. After all, she was fated to stay in this rear palace for the rest of her life, never to return to her home country again.

Carrying the silver mouse in her arms, Rimi cheerfully left the kitchen.

II

"I heard, Your Majesty."

Ryu Shohi, the emperor of Konkoku, was polishing his sword on top of a decorative lacquerware bed. As he was doing so, a man had stepped into his bedchamber. It was none other than the cuisinology scholar Shu Shusei, who had spoken to Shohi in a somewhat reproachful tone.

Shifting his gaze from the blade, in which he could see the reflection of candle

flames, Shohi answered in an annoyed voice. “And what exactly do you suppose you heard?”

“You terrorized one of the consorts of the rear palace, did you not? Is that why you’re here now, all alone in your bedchamber?” Shusei said.

“I terrorized no one. That simpleton was running her mouth about a foreigner in the rear palace, so I simply taught her a lesson,” Shohi stated simply.

“You mean you stood up for that foreign princess? Now that’s unexpected,” Shusei commented in surprise.

“I did not stand up for her. That simpleton angered me for attempting to instigate conflict in the rear palace, that is all,” Shohi offered begrudgingly.

“Simpleton, you say... That simpleton you speak of is your wife, you know,” Shusei sighed. As he did, someone’s laughter could be heard in the room.

“Oh, come on, Shusei. Nothing wrong with calling a simpleton a simpleton.” Sitting carelessly with one leg on the window sill was Shin Jotetsu.

“I heard about you too, Jotetsu. You offered to help His Majesty with cutting off the tongue of Noble Consort So, I’m told,” Shusei added.

“I’m hurt! Who do you take me for? I was just trying to stop His Majesty,” Jotetsu pouted.

“By cutting off Noble Consort So’s tongue?”

“I knew that if I offered to do it instead, he’d lose interest,” Jotetsu said.

“I swear, the both of you... I’m getting a headache,” Shusei grumbled.



Much like Shusei, Jotetsu had also been serving Shohi since he was young. He was now an imperial guard with the rank of junior officer. However, as a military officer appointed by imperial decree, he did not work with any organization, instead serving as Shohi's bodyguard at all times.

Jotetsu had been Shohi's bodyguard since Shohi was only seven, as arranged by the previous emperor and Chancellor Shu. Neither Shohi nor Shusei knew where he came from, but despite being only fourteen or fifteen years of age at the time, he showed impressive skill, and it was clear that he was no ordinary person. And with the previous emperor gone, the only people alive who knew of Jotetsu's background were Chancellor Shu and Jotetsu himself.

Jotetsu had an official position now, but having grown up being watchful of his surroundings and serving as Shohi's bodyguard, his disposition was more that of Shohi's spy. Having been close for many years, Jotetsu would speak his mind to Shohi in a frank manner. He could not help but be a bad influence on him. It seemed Jotetsu had no intention of letting Shohi behave like an emperor.

Now, this is a problem... Is His Majesty still too young to have an interest in women? Shusei thought, but then grew worried as he reflected on himself. He was already twenty years of age, and the people in his vicinity had started bothering him about finding a wife, but he himself had no interest. Shusei had never had any romantic feelings for anyone to begin with, be it a woman or a man.

I just hope His Majesty isn't like me in this regard. He has a duty to produce an heir. Shusei suddenly lifted his head. *Might there exist a food that makes you keener on romance?*

He was vaguely aware of the fact that this kind of thinking was exactly why he was not cut out for romance. However, simply being aware of it did not change who he was, and he would still fail to take note of women's advances. If a beautiful woman were to dance half-naked in front of him, he would first take note of the workings of the dance itself, and only much later would any carnal desires surface. The gastronomer was known around the palace as the "Loveless Scholar."

“And Your Majesty, you mustn’t neglect your supper.” He turned his gaze to the drink and the dim sum placed on the table.

“I do not want it. Have them take it away.”

“This food is important for your mind and body. I chose it personally. Please, eat up.”

Hearing Shusei’s stern tone, Shohi put his sword down by the bed, and reluctantly sat by the table. He picked up a pair of chopsticks as Shusei continued speaking matter-of-factly.

“Tomorrow I will prepare food that will stimulate your libido.”

Jotetsu burst into laughter, and Shohi choked on his food upon hearing this. Shohi reached toward his drink and hurriedly gulped it down, then turned to glare at Shusei.

“Where did that come from?”

“With a stronger libido, I’m sure you will find yourself wanting to visit even those women you refer to as simpletons.”

“Now that’s a stroke of genius, Shusei!” Jotetsu was laughing so hard he could barely speak. Shohi had an irritated look on his face.

“Absolutely not! How are you able to say something so embarrassing with a straight face?”

“Embarrassing, you say? It’s simply one of the many needs of humans, much like the need to eat and sleep.” Shusei was unable to understand why this topic would make someone embarrassed.

“All right, I get it, just stop already. Anyway, I do not want it. Besides, it seems rather unlikely that food like that exists.”

“It does. I just tested it myself recently. It’s decently effective.”

“Well, upon eating it, did you find yourself sneaking into the bedroom of some woman, Sir Loveless?”

“I did not. I was unable to think of a woman to visit, and finding a new one to woo seemed like too much effort. So instead, I spent the whole night

channeling the energy into my writings.”

Jotetsu was desperately trying to stifle his laughter as he listened in on Shusei and Shohi’s conversation.

“Then I too shall simply spend the time writing,” Shohi concluded.

“Now, never mind that. Shusei, have you located it yet?” he continued while picking at his dim sum with his chopsticks. He had done his best to act as though this matter hadn’t been bothering him, but in truth, it had been on his mind ever since he ascended to the throne. And for good reason.

Jotetsu, who until now had been unable to contain his laughter, suddenly showed a composed, but hopeful, look in his eyes. However, Shusei had no information that could ease Shohi’s mind and could do nothing but shake his head.

“We have nothing to go on.”

“I see...” Shohi replied with a disappointed voice.

“Oh well, it wasn’t gonna be that easy. Don’t lose hope yet, Your Majesty. I’m sure we’ll find it sooner or later.”

Shohi nodded at Jotetsu’s casual remark as he picked up a very spicy sauce known as xinciyou and put it on the dim sum. Shusei called out in astonishment, “Your Majesty!” But Shohi ignored him, put the dim sum in his mouth, and started chewing.

“Is that not too spicy, Your Majesty?”

“Without this, it does not taste like anything.”



“Oh, you’re so cute, Tama,” Rimi observed as the silver mouse was nibbling at some kaorizuke on her table. Over the past month, since Rimi found it in the kitchen, the mouse had firmly established its position as Rimi’s beloved pet.

She had asked the eunuch in charge of the kitchen, “I found a silver mouse in the kitchen. Can I keep it?”

The eunuch had replied, “Do whatever you want. I don’t care if it’s a mouse, an ant, a frog, or something else.” So Rimi had done just that.

Tama's limbs were small and delicate like a tiny bird's. Each foot had five small claws. The claws on its front right foot were curled down, seemingly holding something akin to small pearl beads. It was as if the beads had just happened to become stuck under the claws as Tama had grown, and it did not seem possible to remove them. Rimi had named the mouse "Tama," meaning "bead" in her own language.

On the table was, in addition to the plate that Tama was eating from, a celadon plate with a jiggling substance on top. It was a translucent, gelatinous substance, cut up into bite-sized pieces, with small, green beans visible inside. The translucent green fondly reminded her of spring. This translucent substance was actually a Wakokuan dish called hiyanimizore, made from nikogori—fish boiled whole until it turned into this gelatinous substance.

Rimi put a piece in her mouth. She could feel the taste of fish and ginger on her tongue as it melted in her mouth. As she lightly bit down, the refreshing spring beans easily crumbled, providing an interesting mouthfeel.

Her sense of taste had still not returned fully. Whenever she ate kaorizuke, her taste buds would revive for just a few hours. So, she had eaten a piece of kaorizuke and made the hiyanimizore during the short time that she could still taste. Rimi had also noticed that, for whatever reason, she was able to taste Wakokuan food without having kaorizuke first. Thus, at the very least, she could enjoy her own cooking without issue.

When Rimi came here, she had been assigned to one of the services in the rear palace. Each day, she was expected to show up at her station at the right time and perform the duties she had been assigned. However, she was still not used to her work, and it took most of her concentration to simply learn what to do. The others would consider her a nuisance, and it was not unusual for her to be back at the Palace of Small Wings by the afternoon.

After having been sent home with a "You waste of space!" Rimi was enjoying her afternoon drinking tea with Tama. Having frequented the kitchen ever since she first came to the rear palace, she was on good terms with the servant women and the eunuch working there. As a result, she was able to ask the kitchen staff for ingredients, which she would use to make simple dishes for herself. The Wakokuan food had made Tama healthy again. Tama would often

eat Rimi's kaorizuke, and the more she ate, the healthier she became.

Right then, Rimi saw several palace women walking down the cloister. They seemed to be discussing something, and as they passed by Rimi's residence, they started speaking loudly.

"My, the air around here feels awfully stagnant."

"I can sense something barbaric nearby."

"Oh, how frightening. Let's be on our way, quickly."

Same as ever, huh...

Emperor Shohi had warned Noble Consort So not to cause any conflict, but it'd had the opposite effect. So was now blaming Rimi for having incurred the wrath of the emperor. Her animosity had inevitably spread throughout the rear palace, and before long the whole rear palace seemed to have turned against her.

However, on occasion, she would also hear people whisper comments such as "But for some reason, her skin is so beautiful," or "As ugly as Setsu Rimi must be behind that façade, I can't stand how beautiful her skin is."

When it came to Rimi's skin, there was more than genetics at play. For years, she had regularly eaten food that was good for her skin. That included the kaorizuke and also the hiyanimizore in front of her. As her Saigu sister had been fixated on food that was good for your skin, Rimi would make such food on an almost daily basis. The leftovers she would eat herself.

Rimi was currently unable to taste anything without eating kaorizuke first. She was also constantly having trouble at work. She was always stressed when heading there, which only led to more mistakes. The kaorizuke had become an important way to relieve her of all that stress, and so in search of more ingredients for it, she headed to the kitchen as usual once it had become dark. Being on friendly terms with the kitchen staff, she had been permitted to use the ingredients and kitchen equipment as she pleased.

I could go for some fish kaorizuke. If you fry the skin first, you can feel a sweet aroma in your mouth as you eat it, and it has a wonderfully smooth, savory taste. And the meat is succulent too. I just hope they have white fish. But first

things first, I need to find the usual spring melon.

She entered the kitchen, candlestick in hand, to find the ingredients she needed. As she did, something startled her, and she stopped in her tracks.

Someone's there!

In the corner of the dark kitchen was a small table and chair, which kitchen staff would usually use when eating during breaks, but now someone was resting there, with their head on the table. Based on his outfit, Rimi surmised that he was a eunuch. The eunuch did not move a finger as Rimi entered, and Rimi cautiously moved closer.

“Um... excuse me, are you a corpse?” She meant to ask if the eunuch was alive and feeling well. In response, the would-be corpse of a eunuch started laughing, his face still turned down.

“No, I’m no corpse. Not yet, at least,” he spoke in a soft voice and wearily looked up, brushing hair away from his face.

Wow... Who is this person? She observed the eunuch, wide-eyed.
He's...captivating...

III

Rimi had first learned about eunuchs when she arrived in Konkoku. In Wakoku, there had been none. Eunuchs were men who had had their male functions removed in order to be allowed to work in the rear palace. As a result, their bodies ended up slender, their skin fair, and their voices high compared to other men. Neither fully male nor female, they had a curious air about them.

However, “curious” was not even close to describing the eunuch who was now sitting in front of her, lit by the candlelight.

He's almost like a beautiful spirit...

Though he was sitting, Rimi surmised from the length of his arms and legs that he must have been rather tall. His skin was as pale as silk soaked in cold water, his eyes and hair a light brown, which overall gave a very colorless impression. He possessed a sweet, captivating beauty, more alluring than any

concubine in the rear palace.

However, his expression was lifeless, and he seemed exceedingly tired and listless. His beauty had initially left Rimi speechless, but noticing his listlessness, she furrowed her brows.

“Um... Are you not feeling well? You don’t look like a person who would be here this late.”

The shenyi he was wearing was made out of dark silk, and its quality was obvious from its luster.

“Right back at you. You’re a palace woman, right? You don’t look like someone who belongs in a kitchen.”

“I have permission. But that’s not the point. You’re not feeling well, are you? I will go get someone.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m always like this. I just happened to forget to have supper today, you see, and I figured I’d better eat *something* at least. So I stopped by the first kitchen I came across, but there was no one here. I don’t really have much of an appetite to begin with, so I was just resting here.”

No appetite? The moment she heard that, Rimi replied, “I will make something.”

The eunuch became wide-eyed at Rimi’s reflexive response.

“Make something? Food, you mean? *You* will?”

“That’s right,” she nodded and immediately went to inspect the stove. A small flame was still smoldering in the stove. It would be possible to make something simple with this, Rimi thought.

That’s right, I already have my hiyanimizore.

She walked to the stone room in the back of the kitchen used to refrigerate food and took out the nikogori dish—hiyanimizore. She then put it in a pot and lit the stove. She also brought the melon kaorizuke, which had been sitting next to the hiyanimizore, and chopped it up. She took a bite of the finely chopped kaorizuke and felt a gentle aroma in her mouth as her tastebuds revived. She couldn’t very well make food without a working tongue.

He doesn't seem to be feeling well, so I need to make something that's easy to eat. She was suddenly excited at this unexpected opportunity to cook for someone. The eunuch seemed surprised at Rimi, who had started to run around the kitchen out of nowhere.

“Are you, a palace woman, seriously going to make some food? It's fine, you don't have to bother. I'm not really in the mood to eat anyway.”

“Someone who entered a kitchen searching for food isn't in the mood to eat? That's not very convincing. Don't worry, I *want* to make it. You can just sit there and shut your damn mouth if you will.”

The beautiful eunuch was stunned for a moment, then gave Rimi a confused look.

“You're not from Konkoku, are you? Which would make you...that Wakokuan princess, Setsu Rimi, I take it. Rimi, who taught you Konkokuan?”

“An interpreter from Wakoku. He was originally a sailor who would sail between Konkoku and Wakoku.”

“I see, that explains it. ‘Shut your damn mouth if you will,’ eh?”

The nikogori in the pot had started to melt from the heat. She had made this hiyanimizore from freshwater fish. To remove any odor, she had added ginger and spring onion, let it simmer, and painstakingly removed all the scum. As a result, it had turned into a clear and fine liquid with no seasoning needed besides salt. To add some texture and sweetness, and to make it look more impressive, she had also added beans harvested in spring.

She was now in the process of reheating the hiyanimizore and melting it. As she brought it to a simmer, it turned into a soup with beans floating on top. She then added some of what appeared to be leftovers from today's supper: a few thin, square sheets made from wheat, apparently called wonton.

Wonton literally means “cloud drink,” and just as its name implies, if you put it in a liquid and heat it, it turns soft and white like a cloud, going down as smoothly as a drink. The wonton also made the soup more viscous.

She was almost done. To make the flavor a bit richer, she added a popular Konkokuan sauce called ganjiang.

“Here, have a taste.” Rimi poured the finished soup into a bowl and presented it to the eunuch alongside a small plate of kaorizuke. She took a seat on the opposite side of him.

The eunuch seemed confused for a second, but soon picked up a spoon and put a spoonful of soup in his mouth. He continued in silence, drinking one spoonful after another. *The combination of the high-quality fish stock and the slightly sweet ganjiang should have resulted in a gentle-tasting dish, and the texture provided by the wonton should make it go down easily,* Rimi thought.

I hope he likes it. The sight of him bringing the spoon to his mouth was somehow sensual. *I guess even someone as beautiful as him has to eat food. What a relief.* She was relieved at the fact that, despite how beautiful he was, he was no god nor spirit, eating food just like any other human would.

The eunuch put down his spoon, picked up a pair of chopsticks instead, and put a piece of kaorizuke in his mouth. “What’s this? It’s sweet.”

“It’s a dish from Wakoku. It’s called kaorizuke. It’s sweet, but it has no sugar. And if you eat a lot of it, you will become healthier. It’s good for your skin.”

“It’s my first time trying Wakokuan food. I like it.”

He picked up the spoon again. After Rimi had observed his captivating mouth as he ate the soup for a while, he suddenly stopped. The bowl of soup was empty. He exhaled a breath of warm air, and a hint of color seemed to have returned to his previously pale cheeks. Rimi could tell without asking that he was content with the meal, and she felt a mix of relief and happiness.

“Are you always feeling unwell like this?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m feeling unwell. I just didn’t really have an appetite and my stomach felt bloated.”

Just as Rimi had lost her sense of taste after coming to the rear palace, she thought that perhaps this beautiful eunuch also had something weighing on his mind. But having finished the soup, he had a considerably softer air to him than before. She was amazed at how much someone’s demeanor could change after a single bowl of soup. *If he continues eating good-tasting food like this every day, then perhaps whatever is eating at him will abate, and he’ll regain his*

appetite, she thought. His change made her happy.

“I would gladly make this for you anytime you like. Just let me know.”

“Now that’s an extraordinary thing to say.”

“Extraordinary, is it?”

“It’s very extraordinary indeed. I’ll have to thank you somehow. Is there anything you’d like?”

“Not really. I would be happy if you just came to get me whenever you want something to eat.”

The eunuch looked at Rimi as if he was observing an unusual animal. He then burst out laughing. It was beautiful laughter.

“Well, aren’t you cute. All right, fine. But if you ever need something in the future, I’ll fulfill any request you have.”

“Any request...? Um... Who are you, exactly?” The eunuch had spoken with such confidence that Rimi had become curious. He must have been a tremendously high-ranking eunuch to be able to exercise his power as he pleased.

“Me?” The eunuch had smiled mischievously, leaned toward Rimi across the table, and whispered seductively into her ear, “That’s a secret.”

Rimi let out a quick shriek and bent backward, and at the sight of her reaction, the eunuch widened his smile. He then stood up from his chair and left the kitchen, fading into the dark of night.

Rimi held onto the earlobe that the eunuch’s breath had touched. It felt ticklish, as if a butterfly had landed on her ear. He had been too alluring, too captivating for Rimi to handle.

However, that was the last Rimi saw of the beautiful eunuch. She worried about his health. He was probably failing to eat properly, just like on the night they met.

I wish he’d come by for something to eat, she would think as she stopped by the kitchen almost nightly.

Like most other nights, she had just come back to her residence after searching the kitchen for food. She left the spring melon she had brought back in her living room and made for the dark bedroom. It was a dark, moonless night. She placed a faintly burning candle next to her bed and was about to undo her sash when she noticed something was off.

Wait, where's Tama? Usually, Tama would be sleeping bundled up on her bed, but now the mouse was nowhere to be found. Perhaps she was hiding somewhere, but the only time Tama would usually hide was when there were people other than Rimi in the room.

"No, surely not..." The moment she uttered those words, she could sense a chilling presence approaching from the darkness behind her. She attempted to turn around, but before she had a chance, two large hands grabbed her shoulders.

"Heya, miss palace woman. Nice evening we've got here, huh?"

Her body tensed up at the sound of the deep, male voice. This was the rear palace, where no men other than eunuchs were allowed, yet the man behind her was clearly no eunuch. She could tell that he was well-built, masculine, and intimidating.

"Wh-Who's there?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. I've got a little favor to ask of you. Would you mind handing over your most valued belonging?"

Rimi's mind immediately went to her pot of kaoridoko, used to make kaorizuke. Everything else she owned had been brought in by others when she first joined the rear palace. The only special item that Rimi owned was the kaoridoko.

"N-No. Anything but that."

"Now, now, be a good girl, and nothing bad will happen. But if you're not a good girl, I might just have to do something to you. Gotta say, miss palace woman, that's a mighty slim neck you've got there. Looks like I could break it with just one hand." He lightly grabbed Rimi's neck with one hand. The sensation of the man's cold, hard hand immediately filled her with dread. Her

eyes tearing up, she had no choice but to nod.

“That’s a good girl. Now, show me where it is. And don’t make a scene.”

Rimi slowly walked to the side of her bed and picked up the pot as the man watched dubiously.

“It’s in there, is it?”

The man softly shoved Rimi from behind, and she stumbled. Before Rimi knew it, the man was in front of her and had already taken her pot. Looking up from the floor, she could faintly make out the man’s figure. She couldn’t see his face, but his robust, muscular body, and the wide sword hanging from his waist, were terrifying enough.

“Forget this ever happened. As long as I have this, we’re good.”

“But...why? Why do you want that? Who are you?”

“No prying. And don’t go mentioning this to anyone else, got it? Otherwise, I’m gonna have to come and shut you up myself, Setsu Rimi,” the man finished before silently leaving the room and disappearing into the darkness.

The sight of him leaving was so vivid that Rimi doubted her eyes for a moment, sitting dumbfounded on the floor. Before long, tears started to run down her cheeks.

“My kaoridoko...”

Without it, she could not make kaorizuke. And without kaorizuke, she would never get her sense of taste back. Without her sense of taste, she wouldn’t be able to make hiyanimizore. Even if that pale-looking eunuch came by again, she wouldn’t be able to cook for him. At this rate, she would lose not only her sense of taste but her cooking too. That man had more or less stolen Rimi’s only skill. Struck by grief at the loss of her kaoridoko, she was too shaken to even think about who that man was, or why he wanted her kaoridoko.

As she sat on the floor, one tear after another falling on her skirt, she heard a small squeaking noise from under the bed, and Tama appeared. Tama jumped up on her shoulder and started cooing into her ear, almost as if trying to comfort her. However, her tears would not stop.

Tell me, what should I do, Lady Saigu?

The pillar that supported Rimi had suddenly been demolished.

Chapter 3: Reunion in the Moonlit Pear Garden

I

As Rimi was crying, the candle she had lit fizzled out. After some time, the morning sun showed itself, and a thin ray of light shone through a gap in the door into her bedroom. Rimi was still sitting on the floor as morning light struck her tear-soaked skirt.

Oh... It's morning... she thought to herself. Her mind was blank, unable to think of what she needed to do.

Normally she would be getting dressed and having her breakfast before leaving for work. However, now she was unable to understand how she ever performed those actions. It was as if she had completely forgotten the steps as she sat on the floor, unable to move. Tama was sitting on her shoulder, seemingly cowering out of worry for Rimi. However, as if sensing someone's presence, Tama quickly raised her head, jumped down from Rimi's shoulder, and hid beneath the bed. Shortly after, a voice could be heard.

"Lady Rimi? Are you still in your bedroom?" Apparently annoyed at Rimi for not having prepared to leave yet, the old handmaid peeked into the bedroom and spotted Rimi. "What in the world are you doing, sitting on the floor like that?"

Rimi, her head still turned down, simply shook her head as if to say that nothing was wrong.

"Well, in any case, if you do not prepare to leave soon, Lady Rimi, you will be late for your duty," the baffled handmaid said.

Rimi jumped at the mention of the word "duty." For ten years, Rimi's duty had been that of the Umashi-no-Miya. To Rimi, when she heard the word "duty," it instinctively sounded like it was referring to her role as the Umashi-no-Miya. In her head, blank from despair, she felt the word "duty" echo.

Duty. What I need to do. Rimi, absentminded after having her kaoridoko stolen from her, suddenly felt as though she was being scolded by her Saigu sister from far away, as if she was being told, “Well do something about it!”

I have to do something. With nothing but that thought to drive her, she stood up. Despite her head still feeling almost completely numb, she desperately tried to think about what she needed to do. The only thing that mattered to her now was finding that man again.

“I...I have to go find something.”

“What? Lady Rimi?!”

Rimi pushed the old handmaid aside and rushed out of her residence. The handmaid ran after her, yelling, “Lady Rimi, where are you going?!” but Rimi simply ignored her. She passed the inner gate with faltering steps, headed down the cloister, and rushed toward the outer gate. The handmaid finally raised her voice to the point where she was almost screaming, “Where do you think you are going?!”

The old handmaid’s voice bounced off Rimi’s back as she hurried on, stopping before the outer gate. As the main gate was closed, she walked up to the open side gate instead. The eunuch guarding the gate greeted her with a suspicious look.

“What do you want?”

“Could you please let me through? I need to search for something.”

The man from last night was not a eunuch, meaning that he would not be found in the rear palace, where non-eunuchs were forbidden. Given that he was well-dressed and was wearing a sword on his hip, he must have been a military officer, in which case she should be able to find him by searching every nook and cranny of the palace. But to do so, she needed to exit the rear palace first.

“Do you have permission?”

“I don’t. But I will be right back!”

“No can do. We can’t allow anyone without permission to leave.”

“In that case, who do I need to ask for permission?”

“That would be the Department of Service...” The young eunuch spoke in a disjointed way as he looked at the Department of Service building. Rimi nodded.

“Very well, I will go get permission.”

If she revealed what had happened, that man might come back for her life. She needed to come up with some other reason for leaving the rear palace in order to receive permission. She knew that she stood little chance of succeeding, but even so, it couldn't hurt to try. Meanwhile, the handmaid was confused and disoriented.

Suddenly, noticing the chaos outside, several eunuchs appeared from the Department of Service building.

“What are you doing? You are Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, correct?” an older eunuch asked as he approached with a dubious expression.

“Please, calm Lady Rimi down! She has been acting strange the whole morning!” The old handmaid pleaded for help with a shrill voice.

“I am not acting strange at all. I just want to leave to search for something.”

“No matter the reason, concubines are not allowed to leave the rear palace without His Majesty's permission,” a eunuch stated matter-of-factly.

“But I need to go outside!”

“Please leave.”

“No! I want to go outside. I need to search for something. I have to find it.” Rimi and the eunuchs glared at each other, and Rimi started to realize that she wouldn't be let outside going through the proper procedures.

I just need to go outside for a little bit. It doesn't have to be for long. She started to panic. Unable to think properly, she acted on impulse. Just for a little while!

Her head still mostly blank, her body moved on its own. Rimi pushed the young eunuch away and ran for the side gate. However, the eunuchs quickly caught hold of her, grabbing her arms and shoulders.

“Please let me go! I have to leave!”

“Calm down, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu!”

“Oh, Lady Rimi! What an unthinkable thing to attempt!” the old handmaid screeched. Rimi struggled, as the composed eunuchs spoke to her.

“Calm down, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. This often happens with people who have newly joined the rear palace. You are not the first to grow weary of your work and make a fuss by the gate, wanting to go home.”

“No, that’s not it! I...I have to search for something!”

“In either case, without His Majesty’s permission, you will not be leaving through this gate. Please rest in the Department of Service building’s holding cell until you’ve settled down.”

Rimi was dragged by the eunuchs to the Department of Service building, where she was thrown into a barred room.



“What’s that you’re holding? Paperwork?” Shu Shusei, cuisinologist as well as the emperor’s own grand councilor, had come across an official from the Ministry of Personnel on his way to the emperor’s room.

“Yes, I was just about to submit this to His Majesty.”

“It must be annoying to have to go all the way to His Majesty for just one single piece of paper. I’ll hand it in for you, if you’d like.”

The official hesitantly but happily accepted the proposition. He bowed his head in gratitude and left. Shusei looked down at the paperwork he had accepted on a whim when a piece of writing caught his eye.

“Use of the Department of Service’s holding cell?”

It was a report from the Department of Service, which runs the rear palace, which said that the Department of Service’s holding cell was to be used temporarily. This sort of report would normally not be submitted to the emperor. However, in the case of consorts or concubines, the emperor’s permission was needed, even if only after the fact as a formality. It seemed that one of the concubines had attempted to escape the rear palace. Shusei read the

name of the concubine in question.

“Setsu Rimi?” He thought he had heard that name somewhere before and recalled his meeting with a Wakokuan princess as she was about to join the rear palace. She had been a peculiar princess, guarding a pot of food with her life, pleading to be allowed to bring it into the rear palace. “So she’s the one...”

Having come from a land far away, perhaps she was unable to bear her duties in the rear palace. *Though that in itself is not particularly unusual*, he thought as he neared the emperor’s abode. The emperor Shohi was currently attending an imperial council meeting, so Shusei entered the room expecting it to be empty.

Instead, he found Shin Jotetsu waiting inside. He was standing in the middle of the room by a table, upon which he had placed a pot, into which he was now peeking with a troubled look on his face.

“Sheesh, you can’t be serious... Did I have the wrong idea?” he was mumbling to himself.

“What are you doing, Jotetsu? Aren’t you supposed to be attending this morning’s council meeting along with His Majesty?” Shusei said, standing in the doorway, to which Jotetsu responded with a frown.

“Well, you see... I just had a bit of an errand to run.”

“That’s called ‘neglecting your duties,’ you know.” Shusei entered the room and noticed the pot. The pot seemed familiar to him, and as he took a look at its contents, he opened his eyes wide in surprise.

“Isn’t this the pot that the Wakokuan princess, Setsu Rimi, brought here all the way from Wakoku?! What’s it doing here?!” He couldn’t believe that the pot belonging to the very princess whose name was written on the document in his hand was here of all places.

“Well, you know... I may have made a slight mistake.”

“You did this? Why?”

“I told you, it was a mistake. I accidentally brought it here from the rear palace.”

“You ‘brought’ it here? Don’t you mean you *stole* it?” When that foreign

princess entered the rear palace, she refused to give it up with every ounce of strength she had. There was no chance that she would give it up this easily.

Wait, could it be that she... He took another look at the report in his hand. It said that Setsu Rimi had made a fuss about wanting to leave the rear palace in search of something. Could it be that the item she was looking for was her precious pot? And that she had lost her composure at the loss of it, causing her to attempt to leave the rear palace to search for it?

“Why did you steal it, Jotetsu?”

“That’s, well...”

Shusei drew closer to the uncharacteristically dispirited Jotetsu and reached his hand out toward his sword. He pulled on one of the braids hanging from the hilt, which for some reason came clean off.

I knew it seemed off. Shusei did not overlook the fact that a single thread of the braid was white. It was a rolled-up piece of paper, which when unrolled showed a meaningless list of Konkoku characters.

“Hey, give that back.”

“This is some kind of code, isn’t it? The first character means ‘order,’ so I suppose that’s what it is. But an order from who? Did this order tell you to steal the pot?” Jotetsu turned quiet, but Shusei continued. “I recognize this handwriting. It’s from my father, Chancellor Shu, isn’t it? Just what kind of order did he give you? Don’t tell me it’s something that might endanger His Majesty? And why are you receiving orders from Chancellor Shu to begin with?”

“There’s no fooling you, huh. Well, I’ve got my reasons.”

“Neither I nor His Majesty has ever heard those reasons of yours. It doesn’t seem to bother His Majesty, but it certainly bothers me. Just what relationship do you have with Chancellor Shu? Who are you really?”

“C’mon, don’t give me that look. It’s nothing to get that upset over. Anyway, I just got the wrong idea about something and brought this pot here by mistake.”

“Wait, don’t tell me this has to do with...you-know-what? Are you involved?”

“What are you talking about?”

“There’s only one emergency related to His Majesty to be concerned about right now. I’m talking about the Quinary Dragon. It would’ve been easy for you, wouldn’t it?”

Jotetsu grinned. “What, you’re accusing me? The hell would be in it for me?”

“You’re acting strange, so I can’t help but doubt you. Especially now that I know you’re in contact with Chancellor Shu. It’s impossible to tell what’s going on in that man’s head.”

Jotetsu exaggeratedly shrugged his shoulders, then glanced at Shusei with a sad look in his eyes. “Wow, that really hurts, you know. I think I’m gonna cry.”

“Yeah right, as if you’d ever cry. Anyway, if you took that pot accidentally, give it back and apologize, right away.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so. You ever heard of an agent dumb enough to go out of his way to return something he stole? Even if it was just by mistake.”

“This pot is important to that foreign princess. Have a look at this.” Shusei shoved the document in his hand in front of Jotetsu. “After you stole this pot, Setsu Rimi tried to leave the rear palace in search of it and ended up in a holding cell! She must have been absolutely desperate to get it back.”

“So?” Jotetsu said mockingly, at which Shusei furrowed his brow. Jotetsu had a habit of trampling all over people’s feelings with a straight face. Shusei couldn’t stand that part of him. It reminded him of his father, Shu Kojin, whom he hated because of that very same habit.

“Who do you think you are? You’re nothing but a thinking tool,” Chancellor Shu had replied coldly when his young son had attempted to test his father’s love for him. Shusei had only wanted something as simple as to feel loved. Even if it was insincere, he had wanted his father to call him his “dear son.” But the chancellor had trampled carelessly over his feelings.

Ever since then, Shusei had been unable to stand the thought of using his mind for someone else. It felt as if he was but a doll that only existed to think. That is why he insisted on following his own desired path as a cuisinologist.

Without a word, Shusei put the lid on the pot and picked it up.

“What are you going to do, Shusei?”

“If you’re not going, I’m giving it back in your stead.”

“Are you serious? Why do you have to go yourself? Just get some eunuch to return it. Say you found it on the ground or something.”

“I’ll go myself. If you refuse to apologize, I’ll apologize in your stead when I return it.” If he didn’t, he would feel too sorry for the foreign princess, who’d had her beloved pot stolen all because of a simple misunderstanding. She must have understood how little hope there was when she tried to leave the rear palace in search of this. She had to be rewarded for her determination.



Having been thrown into the holding cell, Rimi was slowly realizing what had happened.

It’s not as if I ever had a chance of leaving, no matter how hard I tried. I...I’m such a fool.

Perhaps feeling sorry for Rimi, who would simply hang her head quietly, the eunuchs let her out by the time the sun was setting. “Do not attempt something foolish like this again,” she had been warned, to which she had simply nodded, dejected, before returning to the Palace of Small Wings.

When she arrived at her residence, she found the old handmaid. Even she was worried about Rimi and helped her to bed. The handmaid asked if she wanted something to eat, but she had no appetite. Even if she did eat, it’s not as if it would have tasted like anything. Rimi shook her head in response, at the sight of which the handmaid left the room without a single sarcastic remark.

Rimi lied down on her bed and closed her eyes. She couldn’t taste a single thing. This made her feel empty and hopeless. She was even unable to remember the taste of the kaorizuke that she had enjoyed just yesterday.

I can’t think... She just wanted to sleep in the empty void that was now her mind. Tama quietly peeked out from under the bed and curled up on Rimi’s pillow. She was touched by the small creature trying to cheer her up. “Thank you, Tama,” she whispered, before falling asleep.

When she woke up again, it was dark. She thought herself foolish for trying to

escape reality by sleeping, but even so, she had no willpower and was unable to even sit up. As she reached out to pull the blanket on top of her further up, her fingers touched what felt like paper. Still half asleep, she grabbed the piece of paper and found that something was written on it. Thanks to the moon shining brightly that night, she was able to read it using just the moonlight.

Come to the eastern pear garden tonight as the bell strikes two. I will return something important to you. As soon as she read the dimly lit text, she immediately sprung up. She grasped the piece of paper tightly with both her hands and read what it said once more.

“Something important to me... That must be...”

She looked at the position of the moon in order to determine what time it was. She surmised that the time was drawing near.

She did not know who had written this letter. If she simply left carelessly, there was no way to tell what terrible thing might happen to her, especially as the designated location—the eastern pear garden—was devoid of people. It was a garden far on the outskirts of the rear palace where pear trees grew. It was an uncanny garden, said to be haunted.

However, Rimi did not hesitate for a moment. No matter what happened to her, it couldn't be worse than what she was already going through. As she stepped onto the floor, she heard a tiny squeak and felt something pulling at her sleeve. Tama was looking up at Rimi with teary eyes filled with worry. She was holding her sleeve in her mouth, trying to prevent Rimi from leaving. *She must be worried about me*, Rimi thought.

“Thank you, Tama. But I have to go.” She petted Tama on the back to calm it down, and Tama let go of the sleeve. Rimi waved goodbye to her with a soft smile and left the Palace of Small Wings.

The rear palace was frightening at night. Barely a sound could be heard, and no human could be seen. The women all preferred to withdraw to their residences, spending their nights quietly in their rooms. About the only ones who were out at this hour were spirits of deceased people who failed to pass on, still wallowing in resentment. Fortunately, however, the moon was bright tonight.

The eastern pear garden was quite large, but it was surrounded by roofed walls. Apparently, it had previously been the site of the Virtuous Consort's palace, but after an unfortunate accident, they had decided to demolish the palace and turn it into a garden instead. However, the rumor went that the Virtuous Consort's ghost still haunted the garden, so everyone steered clear of it.

Before Rimi was an entrance elegantly shaped like an arc. At the sight of it, she instinctively tensed up.

The haunted pear garden... Who in the world could have asked me here? However, she had no intention of returning the way she came. She tightened her lips and entered. As she did, a beautiful sight appeared before her.

"It's so pretty..."

Before her were countless pear trees. The moonlight reflected off the flower buds and made the leaves on the trees look white. It looked as if white spirits had descended and were quietly resting on the branches. She was so captivated that she forgot for a moment that the garden was supposed to be haunted.

"Thank you for coming, Setsu Rimi."

A gentle male voice could be heard, and Rimi anxiously searched her surroundings for its source. As she did, a tall, slender man appeared from out of the shadows of one of the trees. Rimi gasped in surprise at the sight of him.



II

“Master Shu Shusei...?” She doubted her eyes. This was the rear palace, where no men were allowed, not even high-ranking officials. However, he was the person who Rimi had longed to see again. Combined with the sight of the beautiful pear flowers, Rimi felt as though she was dreaming. As she was lost in a trance, Shusei slowly walked closer to her.

“Do you remember me, Rimi?”

“Am... Am I hallucinating?” Rimi reached out toward Shusei and carefully touched his shoulder. As she touched him, she could feel that he was indeed physically present, and she let out a quick shriek before pulling back her hand. He was real.

Shusei smiled awkwardly.

“I can understand being surprised, but this is very much reality. This eastern pear garden has a secret tunnel built for His Majesty, which leads to the outer court. The only ones who know about it are His Majesty himself and a select few people close to him, so I took the liberty of using it. I can’t exactly visit you publicly, you see.”

“Visit me?”

“I heard that you attempted to leave the rear palace in search of something. So I asked the Department of Service about it, but they said that I was not allowed to see you in your holding cell. But then I was informed that you had been let out before sundown, so I quickly came up with a way to see you.” Shusei returned to the shadow of the tree he had emerged from, picked up a pot that had been sitting on the ground, and then returned to Rimi.

“I wanted to give this back to you. A friend of mine said he took it from you by mistake. I’m really sorry.”

Rimi covered her mouth with both hands at the sight of the pot. Tears of pure happiness started to well up in her eyes.

“This...!” Trembling, she reached out for the pot with both hands and took it

from Shusei. Holding it in her arms, she collapsed onto the lush understory growing by her feet. With trembling hands, she carefully opened the lid of the pot placed on her legs, confirmed that it did indeed contain the kaoridoko, and closed the lid again. She held the pot tight. Streams of overjoyed tears flowed endlessly from the corners of her eyes.

“Thank goodness... Oh, thank goodness... Now I can...” It felt to her as if she was holding hope itself.

Shusei sat down beside Rimi on the ground.

“I’m sorry for what happened. I truly am. I’m apologizing in place of the man who stole it from you. However, he at least went through the effort of delivering the letter instructing you to come here. I think that was his form of apology. Won’t you forgive him, Rimi?”

“As long as I have this, I don’t care about anything else. As long as I have this.” Listening to Shusei’s calm voice and holding her precious pot of kaoridoko, it felt as if every worry she had had was simply disappearing, and she was being snapped back to reality.

“That pot must mean a lot to you. I remember you fought hard for it when entering the rear palace too.”

Upon hearing this, Rimi’s chest finally started to fill up with a feeling of joy at being able to see Shusei again. She then remembered what she had wanted to say, were she ever to meet him again.

“Thank you so much for what you did back then. I never got to thank you.”

“I didn’t do much at all. I was called in out of the blue and had no idea what was going on, but seeing someone like you who was raised as a princess be so attached to food was both a surprising and enjoyable experience. That’s why I did my best to help you.”

“I wasn’t raised as a princess at all. I had my job as the Umashi-no-Miya.”

Having finally started to calm down, Rimi became unsteady from an overwhelming sense of relief and joy. She leaned limply against a tree trunk.

“What’s an Umashi-no-Miya?”

“I had a duty to make food to offer to the god.” As Rimi reminisced, her eyes turned upward, where she saw the white pear buds glimmer. She was reminded of the pear trees in the garden in the Wakokuan palace.

Rimi was the ninth princess to be born to the emperor. Her mother was one of the emperor’s lower-ranking concubines, and while she had been born to a reputable family, her father died young, leaving them with no fortune. So all she had was her mother, who had to work away from home to support the two of them. The family had no backing to speak of.

And then tragedy befell them as Rimi’s mother passed away from giving birth to her. Rimi may have been the emperor’s daughter and a princess, but she had no backing, no mother, and was allowed to stay in the imperial palace purely out of the goodwill of the emperor.

When she turned seven, there were talks of marrying Rimi off to one of the emperor’s vassals. While still too young for marriage, having no backing nor mother, she couldn’t simply stay in the palace forever. Had she been a prince instead, she would have had the option of being granted a title and becoming a vassal, but princesses had no path forward other than marriage.

However, as the emperor had many daughters, most of the powerful vassals were already married to one of Rimi’s older sisters. She could perhaps have been married off to one of the lower-ranking nobles, but they could not very well marry off a princess to just any family. The nobles themselves would also decline, saying they did not deserve the honor of marrying a princess.

In the end, there was no one for Rimi to marry, and both the emperor and Rimi’s own handmaid were at a complete loss as to what to do. The adults would always look at Rimi with a concerned expression. “You poor thing,” they would say.

She was not being neglected. However, she could not take worrying the people around her, and she felt worthless. She remembered how she would always hunch her small shoulders.

The last suggestion the emperor could think of was to send Rimi to the lands of Ina as an Umashi-no-Miya. Ina was located far away from the imperial capital, and it had a grand shrine where Kunimamori-no-Ōkami was worshiped.

Another of the emperor's daughters was already living there, a Saigu tasked with serving the god. She was the youngest of all of Rimi's older sisters.

And there was another post that served the god along with the Saigu—the Umashi-no-Miya. It was a sacred post, tasked with making food to offer to the god.

"Is that like a shrine maiden?" Rimi had asked.

"It's a sacred post, but in reality, you will serve as a cook. There is nothing princess-like about it."

Rimi reminisced about her life as an Umashi-no-Miya. When making food for the god, any form of defilement was forbidden. She was not to come into contact with others and always had to undergo the cleansing ritual of being purified by water before making food for the god. After offering it to the god, the food was then granted to the Saigu. In practice, the Umashi-no-Miya's duty was to make food for the Saigu.

She would have limited contact with the outside world, undergo daily purification ceremonies, and cook. Being such a restrictive duty, no one had volunteered for it over the past century. As fancy as the title of Umashi-no-Miya may have sounded, in reality, it was nothing but a lonely cook, imprisoned in a kitchen in the middle of nowhere.

However, when her father had asked her if she would consider being an Umashi-no-Miya, she had accepted immediately. She did not even know what an Umashi-no-Miya was; however, she understood that if she accepted, then those around her would stop having to worry so much. She wouldn't have to walk around with hunched shoulders all the time.

At the tender age of seven, Rimi set off for the lands of Ina and became an Umashi-no-Miya. Ten years passed, which Rimi had spent looking at no one but her Saigu sister. Every day, she would make and offer food for the Saigu to eat.

Her sister was a fickle, short-tempered glutton, and a gourmet at that. Like a bird in a cage, food was the only thing the Saigu had to look forward to, and all Rimi would think about was how to satisfy her sister. She wanted nothing more than for the person in front of her to truly enjoy her food. Rimi had stood in the kitchen for days on end, trying to satisfy her sister, who would always be quick

to point out anything she didn't like about the food, until she developed that strange nature of hers, wanting nothing more than to satisfy people with her cooking.

If there were people who enjoyed her food, Rimi could feel as though she was needed. The place where there were people who enjoyed her food was where Rimi belonged. And Rimi had indeed belonged with her Saigu sister.

"Even if I wasn't anything more than a cook, that duty let me feel as if I was allowed to be there. I could relax. There was no place for me in the palace."

"Was life hard for you in the palace when you were young?" Shusei asked with a somewhat pained expression.

"Not at all. I just couldn't take making everyone around me worry. But after I became the Umashi-no-Miya, I could finally relax, and feel that I had found a place where I belonged."

"Konkoku also has stories about making food for the gods, you know."

"What?! There are other people like me here?!"

"It's only a legend. Food offered to the gods is referred to as holy communion, and it's made by immortal, god-like beings who have attained supernatural abilities after undergoing intense training."

Shusei explained that according to Konkokuan legend, countless immortals would master a single, specific technique. Martial arts, poetry, hunting, farming; there were all sorts of techniques one might master.

"And among them are immortals who master cooking, and it's said that after doing so, they would make food for the gods. So it's not humans who offer food to the gods. However, my interpretation of the legend is that with enough knowledge and the right technique, it's possible to make food with an effect worthy of being offered to the gods. You see, I've served His Majesty since I was young..."

"Oh, I've heard about that. My handmaid told me. She said that you serve His Majesty."

"Oh really?" Shusei continued talking. "I believe that it must be possible to

improve His Majesty's qualities as an emperor through the food he eats. I've diligently researched the effects of various foods and systematically documented them. And three years ago, my work was finally recognized as a new field of study called cuisinology. So while we may not have an Umashi-no-Miya, we do have cuisinology."

Rimi blushed as she held her beloved pot tight.

He went so far as to establish a field of study for the sake of his beliefs...

Through her work as an Umashi-no-Miya, she had more or less sensed that it was possible to bestow effects upon people depending on what food you gave them. However, she had never thought to attempt to investigate these effects, and establishing a field of study and systematically documenting it would never even have crossed her mind.

"If you studied it, I'm sure there are all kinds of discoveries to be made..." she said. Shusei smiled awkwardly.

"Well, it's mediocre at best, I'd say. You see, I'm actually the only cuisinologist in the country."

"You mean cuisinology is a loner field that you're admirably studying all by yourself?"

"I wish you wouldn't phrase it that way. I come out sounding pretty sad. Can't you phrase it more euphemistically?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not very good at Konkokuan. So you mean cuisinology is...a lonely-like, sad-like field belonging to you?"

Shusei fell silent for a moment.

"That's even more direct than before... Don't tell me you think simply adding 'like' to a word makes it sound less blunt?"

"Does it not?"

"It does not. Your Konkokuan is sometimes remarkable, but other times rather questionable... Anyway, cuisinology is about researching and documenting what effects food can have on people. If possible, I'd also like to research new, unknown foods and see what effects they have. I only recently

investigated a food that is necessary for the emperor's bloodline to be preserved."

"A necessary food?"

"It's a food that increases your libido. I collected secret recipes known by brothel madams and the like, and I performed experiments to investigate their effects. I tried many different kinds of foods on different people, including myself. However, I have so far only been able to verify an effect with one of the foods, a southern fruit known as jiasheng. If you eat it regularly, you become aroused."

"I see, aroused..." Rimi nodded along as she listened intently before she suddenly realized what he had just said.

A-Aroused?! She couldn't believe the words that just came out of this composed cuisinologist's mouth. However, Shusei simply replied as earnestly as ever.

"That's right. It has been proved to work. I was almost jumped by a colleague who was helping me out with the experiment. At the time I was testing it on myself as well, so had I not kept my composure, it would have been an absolute disaster." Despite the risqué subject, Shusei spoke matter-of-factly. "However, you have to be careful about how much you ingest and when you ingest it for it to have any effect. At some point, I want to include this, among other research, in a book called *The Principles of Food Effects*."

"Will you let me read that book when you've finished writing it?"

"Of course, I will give you a copy. You are, after all, a Wakokuan immortal who treats the gods to holy communion," Shusei replied jokingly as he stood up and brushed the grass from his skirt. He then turned toward Rimi and offered her his hand.

"Now, stand up. We've spoken for far too long. I'm not someone who should be here. However, I'm happy that I was able to give that back to you and got an opportunity to talk with you. I'm relieved."

Seeing him offer his hand, Rimi felt as though she was reliving their first encounter. Behind him were shimmering white pear buds and a beautiful moon

shining in the night sky.

Beautiful... Oh, how beautiful he is...

Ever since Rimi came to Konkoku, she had felt as though she didn't belong. It was similar to the uneasiness she had felt when she was young, and she was constantly haunted by the sadness and loneliness of not being accepted. However, there were kind people like Shusei here. Having even just one person in this vast land of Konkoku smile at her like this made her feel like she could endure her uneasiness. As long as someone like Shusei existed in this country, she could feel a sense of relief.

She took his hand and was pulled onto her feet. As she looked at Shusei, she was suddenly overcome by sadness.

"Um... Will I ever see you again?"

"I wonder. We are two people who would normally never meet. But perhaps our paths will cross again someday."

Shusei quickly released Rimi's hand, turned around, and disappeared into the darkness beyond the pear trees. Rimi stared at the now empty darkness, and suddenly her chest hurt as if she was being crushed.

Master Shusei... Please, may we meet again...

III

Ever since she met Shusei on that moonlit night, a lonely feeling had occupied a corner of Rimi's heart. However, having gotten her kaoridoko back, she was now able to have a piece of kaorizuke every day. Ever since she had met with Shusei for the second time, her sense of taste had been returning little by little. To her surprise, it was fully restored after a few days, allowing her to taste even the most delicate of flavors. It was as if Shusei had taken all her anxiety and worries with him as he left that beautiful pear garden.

As she went about her days in the rear palace, the spring air had started to fade, and in its place came a warmth that caused the flowers to bloom in unison. And Rimi's surroundings were also changing in strange ways.

She had been assigned to Food Service and tasked with collecting requests for food from each of the palaces and sending out orders for them. Wakoku and Konkoku used the same writing system, so she found it easier to write rather than speak. Even so, she had no idea what she was doing at first, and every day was a struggle.

For example, all palaces put in a request for “water,” but as each kitchen in the rear palace had its own well, she could not see the point in ordering water, so she removed it from her list. However, it turned out that the water used for tea was bought from water merchants, so she had to rewrite the orders in a panic. She had also become confused at the large variety of the Konkokuan sauce, *jiang*, and had been scolded when she ordered the wrong type.

The other palace women and eunuchs of the Food Service had been cold toward her at first. However, with time, she made acquaintances who would teach her meticulously or help her out whenever they had a spare moment.

Once she became close with someone, they would without fail ask her, awkwardly, “I’ve heard that there’s a secret to your beautiful skin. Please tell me what it is.” When Rimi explained that it’s the result of eating Wakokuan food, they would ask her to share some of it. However, Rimi did not have enough *kaoridoko* to make a significant amount of *kaorizuke*, so she would only sometimes share a little bit with the palace women and eunuchs who were particularly kind to her.

“That’s a bit...creepy, maybe,” Rimi muttered in her residence. The old handmaid, who had been tidying up the room, had turned around with the widest smile she could muster on her face.

“Heavens, what are you saying, Lady Rimi? Oh, you must be tired! Shall I prepare some tea for you? How about some flowering tea?”

“This is *extremely* creepy...” The handmaid who previously had mocked her at every turn had recently been acting awfully friendly. It was clear that this change had been spurred by *the rumor*—the rumor that there was a secret to Rimi’s beautiful skin. In the rear palace, where most people cared greatly about their appearance, those who knew of secret treatments were respected and valued. Many who wished to be on their good side would approach them.

As a result, the harassment that Rimi had previously experienced daily had now all but vanished. However, there was something she could not figure out. Just who spread this rumor to begin with, and why?

Even the servant women working in the kitchen of the Little Wing Palace were gossiping about Rimi. However, they rarely had any opportunity to speak to palace women or handmaids. She could not see how the servant women's rumors could have spread to the palace women and handmaids.

Rimi's old handmaid had originally not believed her, saying that she could not "imagine that eating something like that would be good for your skin." As the handmaid came back, cheerfully carrying Rimi's flowering tea, Rimi decided to test her.

"Beautiful skin..."

"What is that about beautiful skin, Lady Rimi?!" The handmaid bent herself forward with such excitement at Rimi's short utterance that she almost dropped the teapot.

Yeah, this is suspicious. The palace women and handmaids were without a doubt gossiping about the secret to Rimi's skin, and it must have come from a trusted source. If not, the old handmaid would never have changed her demeanor so drastically.

"What is that about your beautiful skin, Lady Rimi? You're talking about that pot of yours, aren't you? Could it be that you have decided to share some with me as well?!"

"Not really."

"Oh... I see..." The clearly dejected handmaid listlessly poured tea into Rimi's cup.

"When I told you about the kaorizuke before, you didn't believe that it could be good for your skin. Why do you want it now? What made you believe me?"

"Noble Consort So's handmaid was talking about it. If the Noble Consort's handmaid says it, it must be true."

Noble Consort So? Why? She was the very person who had tried to turn the

rear palace against Rimi.

“Excuse me. Would this happen to be Lady Setsu Rimi’s room?” A young, refined handmaid had appeared by the entrance to Rimi’s residence. It was Rimi’s first time seeing her.

“Yes, I am Rimi. What do you need?”

“Noble Consort So is requesting your presence.”

Rimi was startled. It was the very person whom she had just gossiped about.

“What could Noble Consort So need from me?”

“She would like to invite you for tea. She asked you to come alone. I will show you the way, so there is no need for your handmaid to accompany you.”

Hearing the reason only surprised Rimi even more.

For tea?! What in the world happened?!

Her old handmaid whispered to her in a surprising show of kindness.

“It’s highly suspicious of them to request that you don’t bring me along, Lady Rimi. She must be planning something.”

“Hmm, yeah, you’re probably right. But, well, it’s not as if she’s going to eat me. Besides, you don’t often get a chance to have a look at the Noble Consort’s palace.” Rimi smiled back at So’s handmaid.

“I accept the invitation.” In a display of her carefree nature as well as the curiosity that she developed after years of living like a bird in a cage, Rimi agreed to attend Noble Consort So’s tea party. The handmaid sighed.

The Palace of Excellent Beauty, where Noble Consort So lived, was twice as big as Rimi’s own Palace of Small Wings, with a splendid peony garden in front. Vermillion cloisters surrounded the peony garden with a path leading to the middle of the garden that connected to a gazebo for having tea parties. Rimi was being led there, where an ebony lacquerware table and matching chairs sat within the gazebo, on which Noble Consort So and a eunuch were sitting. Beside them were six or so handmaids who were waiting on the table.

"I have brought Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu," the guide handmaid spoke, at which Noble Consort So and the eunuch turned toward Rimi.

"Ah!" Rimi let out a quiet, surprised squeal. The eunuch was none other than that beautiful eunuch she had made soup for in the kitchen that night. He was smiling, but he looked pale as always, which caused Rimi concern.

He looks like he hasn't been eating properly.

The eunuch returned Rimi's frown with a distant smile, as if it was their first time meeting. Noble Consort So wore a smile so fake that it seemed malicious.

"Welcome, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. Do forgive the sudden invitation. I've been wishing to have tea with you for the longest time."

"I'm grateful for the invitation," Rimi replied, though she was unsure how to proceed. Had the old handmaid been here, she could have quietly whispered the proper etiquette to her, but alone she was at a loss.

"My, she doesn't know the proper etiquette."

"What did you expect of a small monkey from the sea?"

The nearby handmaids giggled as they gossiped, just loud enough for Rimi to hear, but So softly scolded them.

"Give that a rest, won't you? I shan't forgive you for speaking ill of my friend."

What is the deal with this farce? Is the reason she told me not to bring my handmaid just so she could do this? The handmaids badmouthed Rimi, to which Noble Consort So would rebuke them. It was all clearly scripted.

"Please, right this way."

Rimi sat down on the chair she had been shown to. Noble Consort So then started speaking with an affected sad look.

"I must apologize to you, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. My handmaids have been terribly rude to you. I've told them to stop it for a while now, but they simply won't listen. I'll be even harder on them going forward, so please, won't you forgive them?"

Rimi was filled with suspicion as a lovely painted tea set decorated with birds

and flowers was placed in front of her.

“Let me introduce you. This is Sai Hakurei. He serves His Majesty directly, and he’s one of my favorite palace attendants.”

His name is Sai Hakurei? And he’s His Majesty’s palace attendant? No wonder he seemed so confident...he really wasn’t someone who belonged in the kitchen. Given that he served the emperor directly, he must have been a far higher rank than Rimi. She could not understand what such a high-ranking eunuch could have been doing in the small palace’s kitchen in a corner of the rear palace.

“Say, isn’t Hakurei simply beautiful? I always make sure to fetch him when I’m having tea. He comforts the heart much better than any peony could, wouldn’t you say?”

Rimi could not bring herself to nod in agreement.

Yes, he may be beautiful, but she’s treating him as if he’s a doll merely made to look at. I can’t enjoy my tea with someone who looks this unwell right in front of me. I need to get him to eat something, otherwise, I can’t relax... How about I shove this dessert right down his throat? She glanced at the thin-skinned rice cake in front of her, almost seriously considering doing just that. Noble Consort So, unaware of what was going on in Rimi’s head, smiled proudly at Hakurei.

“Hakurei, this is my new friend, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu,” So introduced Rimi to Hakurei, who immediately replied before Rimi had a chance to open her mouth.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu. My name is Sai Hakurei.”

Huh? A pleasure to meet me? Rimi looked at the smiling Hakurei, unable to tell what his intentions were. At a loss as to what to do, she decided to follow his example.

“I’m Setsu Rimi. I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“The pleasure is... Oh, it looks like someone is here for me.”

A eunuch passed through the peony garden toward the gazebo. Hakurei excused himself, stood up, and walked out into the garden. Noble Consort So

observed him as he walked through the blooming garden before turning to face Rimi, almost giggling.

“You know, there are rumors that Hakurei is actually a man.”

“I’m sorry? He’s certainly beautiful, but there’s no doubting that he’s a man. He’s awfully tall for a woman.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. They say that he hasn’t lost his male abilities.”

“Abilities? I’m not sure I...”

“My, do you really need me to say it out loud?”

Rimi had been confused at what So was talking about, but now she finally grasped what she meant.

“Oh, I see what you mean! You mean he can have children, I see. Well, that’s great, isn’t it? But wait, what? Huh? That’s not possible, is it?” Noble Consort So was saying that his male bodily functions may still be intact. However, eunuchs, by definition, have had their male functions removed in order to be allowed into the rear palace.

“Now, it’s only a rumor. But Hakurei is special,” So replied suggestively. But before Rimi could ask for clarification, Hakurei returned. With a skillfully forced smile, So changed the subject.

“Now, Lady of Precious Bevy Setsu, speaking of beauty, your skin truly is beautiful. Oh, how jealous I am. Is there some secret to your skin?” Noble Consort So got straight to the point. Looking at So, Rimi now understood the point of the farce that played out when she first arrived.

Unbefitting her young age, So’s face was covered in a thick layer of white powder. Below the face powder, acne was visible on her cheeks and forehead. She seemed to be worried about her skin. Noble Consort So had heard that there was a secret to Rimi’s beautiful skin and wanted to learn what it was. However, she could not very well expect the person whom she had harassed for so long to willingly give up her secret. Thus, she devised a plan. She put on this scripted routine in an attempt to make Rimi think that it was the handmaids, not So herself, who were behind it.

I guess she wants me to conveniently forget how she insulted me in front of His Majesty. Do I really look that scatterbrained to her? Well, I supposed I might.

So's motive was simple, and Rimi quickly saw through it. But what bothered her more was the question of who had spread the rumor about Rimi to begin with.

"Who told you that?" Rimi asked, but Hakurei softly interjected.

"Your handmaid told me about your Wakokuan food. I then mentioned it to Noble Consort So's handmaids, who in turn told Noble Consort So. It's as simple as that."

That was a lie. The old handmaid hadn't believed Rimi about the kaorizuke at first.

Did he spread the rumor himself, after trying the kaorizuke that night? Rimi wondered what he was trying to do, as he looked back at Rimi with a vague smile.

"Won't you tell me what your secret is?" So gave Rimi her best puppy dog eyes, as she pleaded with a nasal, innocent-sounding voice.

Rimi was unsure what Sai Hakurei was plotting, but now that it had come to this, the most pressing question was how to respond to Noble Consort So. Rimi possessed a learned reflex that made her want to make food for anyone who asked for it. She wanted to feed them.

However, this was not just any person she was talking to, and so she had trouble making up her mind. Harassing someone for so long, only to turn around and attempt to exploit them when it suited her offended Rimi's sensibilities. But at the same time, making So indebted to her would make life easier for her in the rear palace. And if she turned her down, the harassment might just take a turn for the worse. But if she shared some of her kaorizuke, So would be forced to treat her well.

Wherever she was needed, that is where she belonged. As much as I hate it, if this is what I need to do to make a place for myself here... Rimi made up her mind.

"If you eat something I make called kaorizuke every day, your skin will turn

pretty. If you don't mind, Noble Consort So, I will deliver the kaorizuke personally."

Noble Consort So raised her voice in delight. At the same time, Hakurei came closer to Rimi and whispered in her ear.

"If you play your cards right, you'll be able to control Noble Consort So."

Rimi was taken aback.

What a terrifying thought. It's true that to a Noble Consort, looks are almost as important as life itself. If Noble Consort So wished to keep her skin beautiful using Rimi's kaorizuke, then Rimi's standing would improve dramatically. Hakurei was not exaggerating.

As Rimi turned her gaze to Hakurei in surprise, he had a faint, vague smile on his face. Rimi was unable to tell what he was thinking.

An overjoyed Noble Consort So offered Rimi some prized monkey tea, but Rimi did not want to stay long. She quickly excused herself, left the Palace of Excellent Beauty, and set off toward the Palace of Small Wings.

But why did Master Hakurei spread the rumor about the kaorizuke? He mentioned controlling the Noble Consort, so could he have been trying to improve my position in the rear palace? Would he do that? She felt a bit scared of Hakurei. There was also the strange rumor about Hakurei that she had heard from Noble Consort So. It seemed implausible, but she still couldn't help but be a little bothered by it.

She was walking home with an uncharacteristic frown on her face when suddenly someone obstructed her path. Rimi looked up to find a eunuch with two guardsmen standing behind him. As she stopped, the eunuch made eye contact with her.

"Lady Setsu Rimi, correct?"

"Yes."

"You are hereby under arrest."

"Is that so, under arrest..." She repeated the unfamiliar word, before

becoming horrified as its meaning finally surfaced in her head.

“A-Arrest?!”

The guardsmen moved in on her and both grabbed one of her arms. They then began walking rapidly, almost dragging Rimi behind them.

“Please wait! Where are you taking me?!”

“We have received orders to take you to His Majesty in the outer palace. You are accused of affronting His Majesty.”

“Affronting him? Me? But I’ve never even spoken to him! Why?!”

“Please just be quiet and come with us,” the eunuch coldly instructed her.

Chapter 4: The Tributes from Wakoku

I

Rimi was brought to the Palace of New Harmony. The ceiling was over three times the height of the average person with deep purple pillars. A number of high-ranking officials were sitting in rows inside the solemn palace.

Sitting on a throne raised one level above the other seats was Ryu Shohi, who was resting his chin on his hand and had one leg on the throne in an arrogant-seeming demeanor. Next to him was Shin Jotetsu. Rimi was brought in front of Shohi and made to kneel on the cold floor.

What happened? What's going on?

One official stepped forward and started speaking.

"As reported earlier, Wakoku has made light of and disrespected our country. Setsu Rimi here is of Wakokuan origin. What shall we do with her, Your Majesty?"

Wakoku has made light of and disrespected Konkoku? What is he talking about?

Shohi observed Rimi with a strikingly beautiful face.

"Behead her, brine her head, and send it back to Wakoku," he spoke in a strikingly cruel tone.

"Please wait, Your Majesty! How has Wakoku disrespected you?! I can't accept being beheaded without even knowing the reason!" Rimi raised her voice, unable to keep quiet. The official from before looked her way.

"The tributes sent from Wakoku on the occasion of His Majesty the Emperor's ascension to the throne all served to mock our country."

"That can't be! Wakoku sent the finest gifts possible to celebrate His Majesty's ascension from the bottom of their hearts! As a symbol of their

loyalty, they even sent me, one of the princesses of Wakoku, to the rear palace.”

“Those supposed gifts you speak of were nothing of the sort. In celebration of the ascension, Wakoku sent dry bark and scraps of wood. Fragrant wood would have been one thing, but these scraps smell nothing!”

“Bark... Scraps of wood...” Rimi had no recollection of such gifts being brought to Konkoku. She thought back to when the officials from Wakoku who had accompanied her on the boat ride to Konkoku had let her have a look at the gifts and had a sudden realization.

“No, those are ingredients of the finest quality! They’re food!”

“I do not see how they could possibly be food.”

“It’s true! Wakoku sent the greatest ingredients as a tribute!” Rimi cried out as she stared at the official.

Suddenly, Shohi pointed his finger at the official.

“Minister of Rites, bring the gifts from Wakoku here. I will inspect them myself.”

Wh-What?! Rimi turned away from her staring contest with the official to look at Shohi. Did the emperor seriously order them to chop off my head based on nothing but the report from the official without even looking at the gifts himself? Who orders the beheading of someone based on such sloppy evidence?!

Feeling a mixture of surprise, exasperation, and anger, Rimi was left dumbfounded while four guardsmen carried in the gifts from Wakoku and placed them next to her. On trays large enough to fill a doorway were mountains of black, flat, stiff items. The items were placed in large stacks, each tied together with durable paper strings.

This was high-grade umifu, which was made by harvesting and drying large and flat seaweed of the same name. Simply adding it to the food as a seasoning, then boiling the food, enhanced the flavor tremendously, but it could also be used to make a wonderful stock.

Next to it, stacked similarly, were hard, brown, spindle-shaped objects, about the size of two hands. These, too, were high-grade ingredients, called kengyoken. They were made from a fast-swimming sea fish with blood-red meat called kengyo. You would fillet the fish, add a special kind of mold, smoke it, and dry it, removing any moisture until it was rock solid. By being shaved into thin slices, kengyoken too could be made into a wonderful stock.

In Wakoku, umifu and kengyoken were both as valuable as gold. Not only were the raw materials rare, but it also took a lot of work to make the final product. Also, the process often failed partway, with only a small amount of the original materials coming out as high-grade ingredients.

However, to Konkokuans, they looked like nothing more than bark and wood scraps.

I can't believe this... The thoughtless attempt to send something rare as a tribute had backfired. It would have been better had they simply sent something conventional like gold. But it was too late to do anything about it now.

Shohi stepped down from his throne, walked over to the trays, took up a piece of kengyoken, and inspected it closely for a moment.

"They're wood scraps. Off with her head," he casually commanded as he threw the kengyoken back onto the tray.

"Your Majesty, these are ingredients!" Rimi spoke loudly, as the guardsmen were about to grab hold of her arms.

Suddenly, someone came out from behind the throne and swiftly made his way to Shohi's side.

"Your Majesty, there is a rumor that Setsu Rimi has been making a food prized in the rear palace using a strange ingredient that she brought from Wakoku," the person whispered into Shohi's ear from behind him as Rimi widened her eyes at the sight.

"Master Hakurei!"

Shohi frowned suspiciously.

“Is that true, Hakurei?”

The beautiful eunuch smiled captivatingly as the officials exchanged perplexed and unhappy glances, but no one said anything. Eunuchs used to be something only captives or slaves became, and even now the people of the court would tend to think of eunuchs as lesser. Thus, a eunuch’s private advice could never count as an official statement, and the officials’ pride would never allow them to react to unofficial advice during an imperial council.

However, the advice had reached not only the emperor’s ears but the officials’ as well. Personal advice from a eunuch close to the emperor was a troublesome thing. As a result, most officials had a strong dislike for high-ranking eunuchs but also wanted to curry their favor in secret.

Jotetsu, who was standing next to the throne, also seemed displeased.

“Is this woman making food in the rear palace from this bark and these scraps of wood, Hakurei?”

“No, I believe she is using some other ingredient. However, if these really are high-grade ingredients from Wakoku, we would be beheading a Wakokuan princess based on a misunderstanding. Why don’t we call someone more well-read on these matters?”

Rimi was close to trembling out of fear. All she could do now was place her faith in what Hakurei had to say.

“Then call Shusei here. Have him decide if these are fit for human consumption.”

Master Shusei?! If they call Master Shusei here, then maybe...! Rimi was suddenly filled with hope. She had been wanting to see that man again ever since he returned her pot of kaoridoko that night. Not to mention that he was a cuisinologist who was friendly with Rimi.

An attendant ran to get Shusei. Rimi’s and Hakurei’s eyes met, and he smiled vaguely at Rimi. It seemed as though he was sympathizing with Rimi and trying to cheer her up, but also as if he was having fun at Rimi’s expense.

Soon, Shusei appeared.

“What is the matter, Your Majesty?” Shusei prostrated himself upon entering before he approached the throne, where he became suspicious at the sight of Hakurei. He then became wide-eyed upon seeing Rimi kneeling on the floor in front of the throne.

“You are Setsu Rimi, are you not? What are you doing here?”

Shohi returned to his throne, where he once again placed his chin on his hand wearily.

“Shusei, I called you here to ask you something. The bark and scraps of wood you see there are tributes from Wakoku. A man from the Ministry of Rites asserts that Wakoku has insulted our country with these gifts. The Ministry of Personnel also recommends we punish them. However, the Wakokuan princess claims that these are high-grade ingredients and that Wakoku is not insulting me at all. What do you think? Are these ingredients?”



Rimi desperately looked up at Shusei. Shusei observed Shohi and Hakurei with a bewildered look, before turning his gaze to Rimi. Finally, having made up his mind, he nodded.

“I will have a look.”

Shusei approached the mountain of gifts and took a piece of the umifu and kengyoken, smelling them and running his fingers across them. He tried nibbling on the edge of a piece, but it was far too solid to bite, and he quickly gave up on the idea, a puzzled look showing on his face.

“Well, Shusei?”

Shusei frowned as he responded to Shohi.

“I can smell a faint scent of some kind, but this does not seem edible to me.”

“No, please! Master Shusei!” Rimi shouted in shock, but Shohi replied coldly.

“Off with her head.”

“Please wait, Your Majesty.” Shusei stood up and walked up in front of Rimi as if to shield her. “These may not look like ingredients to us, but perhaps this princess knows how to turn them into something that can be eaten. I have heard that she used to make food that would be offered to the gods in Wakoku.”

Master Shusei! Rimi came close to crying at the sound of his words and the sight of his gallant back.

“You say she will turn this into something edible? Is she some kind of sorcerer?”

“I cannot say, but as a scholar who studies food, I have a great interest in unknown ingredients.”

“However, if they are not ingredients, and Wakoku truly is mocking me, I will have to take that woman’s head off.”

“Why don’t we put her to the test first? You can always take her head off after, if need be.” Shusei looked behind him, at Rimi. “Are you able to prove that this is food, Rimi?”

“Y-Yes! I am! These are marvelous, delicious ingredients. I will prove that Wakoku is not mocking His Majesty by any means. Please, let me do it.”

“Very well. Prove it.”

At the sound of Shohi’s piercing voice, Rimi did her best to reply without her voice trembling.

“I can’t do it right away. I need to prepare. I need a kitchen and time.”

“Then I shall give you seven days to prove it. You will be responsible for her in the meantime, Shusei. I give her this time out of respect for that curious hobby of yours.”

“In that case,” Shusei began, ready for the challenge, “since I’m unable to enter the rear palace, I propose moving the princess to the Palace of the Water Spirit and having her attempt the challenge for seven days there.”

“I don’t care,” Shohi replied curtly and stood up from his throne. “Woman. You said you would make this taste good, yes? In seven days, you are to provide me with food that can satisfy me using this tribute from Wakoku. I hereby declare this council to be over.”

Shohi immediately left the hall. Jotetsu briefly looked Rimi’s way before he went after Shohi, expressionless, followed by the aides. The officials from the Ministries of Rites and Personnel gave Rimi a bitter look, but left the room quietly, unable to oppose Shohi.

Rimi was too weak to stand. She was truly paralyzed by fear. Her mind was blank, but she felt a sense of relief at the fact that her head was at least still attached to her body.

“Setsu Rimi. I’d like to say it’s good to see you again, but...how in the world did you find yourself in this mess?” Shusei furrowed his brow in a worried expression as Hakurei walked up next to him. “Hakurei, the attendant who came to fetch me, said that you’re the one who had His Majesty call for me.”

“Well, I owe her a favor, you see. I figured you’d be able to make the best of the situation,” Hakurei said as he smiled and turned his gaze to Rimi.

“Master... Hakurei... Th-Thank you so much.”

“It’s still too early to thank me, Setsu Rimi. You still need to prove that this is food in the span of seven days.”

“That...I can do. They... They really are ingredients, I swear.”

“I believe you. But this isn’t Wakoku. There’s no telling if things will be that easy,” Hakurei said before he turned and walked out of the room. Shusei crouched down to Rimi’s level and inspected her face.

“Rimi, are you all right?”

“Master Shusei... Thank you so much. Thanks to you...”

“Like Hakurei just said, it’s too early for thanks.”

“Why did you help me?”

“If you tell me that’s food, I can’t help but become interested, can I? I’ve never come across that kind of wood scrap-like food in my life. It would be outright savage to have you executed without even putting it to the test first. And the two of us do share some kind of bond. Thus, the two of us will be heading to the Palace of the Water Spirit, which is located outside the capital. There you will spend seven days to prove that those scraps of wood truly are ingredients. Are we clear?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, let’s be off.”

“Yes.” Rimi nodded in response, but she was as unsteady on her legs as a newborn deer.

“Rimi, it appears you can’t stand?”

“I-I’m fine. I’ll be able to stand if you just give me some time. Probably.”

“How long do I need to wait?”

“Well... How many days would you mind waiting?”

“Well, not more than two or three... Jokes aside, I’m afraid I’m not quite patient enough to wait that long.” Shusei suddenly picked up Rimi.

“Master Shusei?!”

“I’ll carry you. Don’t struggle,” he responded calmly to the flustered Rimi.

Rimi had never had such close contact with a man before, and she flushed at the sensation of his strong, hard arms against her back and legs. Being carried by the person she had wished so dearly to see again was like a dream. She raised her gaze, and Shusei’s well-defined jawline came into close view. He had an intelligent-seeming, beautiful face.

His face... His face is so close... Or rather, everything is so close... I’m touching him...

Shusei walked briskly with Rimi in his arms and took no notice as she blushed intensely all the way to her ears. It seemed more as if he was carrying an object than a lady, but despite that curtness, Rimi’s heart was racing so much that she feared Shusei would feel her pulse.



Why must that Setsu Rimi girl have such poor timing?

Sai Hakurei chased after Emperor Shohi, toward the emperor’s living room. As a palace attendant who served the emperor directly, he was of third rank and had the duty of serving as a middleman between the emperor and the rear palace. While not an official, he still had the same rank as a minister. He had a good understanding of the will of the emperor, was trusted by the consorts who governed the rear palace, and his private advice carried a lot of weight. However, giving his opinion during an imperial council was normally beyond his status. Even so, Hakurei needed to save that Wakokuan princess, Rimi.

The Minister of Personnel must have been rather disgruntled. After all, it was none other than me who gave his opinion. Jotetsu also seemed displeased. But it was fortunate that Chancellor Shu wasn’t present. Had he been, he could easily have prevented my private advice. He let out a chuckle, but immediately erased any trace of it before he stepped into Shohi’s living room.

“Your Majesty, forgive me for overstepping my bounds a moment ago.” He bowed deeply to Shohi, who was sitting with a tea set in front of him. Shohi responded without looking back at Hakurei.

“I do not mind. That was nothing more than simple private advice.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I am truly grateful for your kindness.”

Shohi frowned at Hakurei’s servile demeanor. Sitting quietly by the window was Jotetsu, who was staring intently at Hakurei. Noticing him, Hakurei tried to return his glance with the most natural smile he could manage.

“You seem as if you’d like to say something, Jotetsu.”

“Nah, I’m just like you, someone who might as well not exist. I won’t butt in on stuff that doesn’t concern me.”

“Please, no need for such humility. You’re no eunuch like me, after all,” Hakurei replied, pretending not to notice Jotetsu’s snide remark. He then turned back to Shohi. “But never mind that. Your Majesty, will you be visiting the rear palace tonight? Noble Consort So has seemed very lonely as of late.”

“You may leave. I have no interest in going.”

With a final beautiful smile, Hakurei left the room. As he walked to the rear palace, he stopped to look up at the sky, which was shining a piercing blue above the tiled roofs.

“Now then, what to do about Setsu Rimi...”

He had some amount of fondness for Rimi, who had served him soup once in that midnight kitchen. When he had put that soup in his mouth, he had felt as if it was his first time having something warm to eat in a long time—despite having had hot congee for breakfast that very same day. It was a sensation he had forgotten about long ago, of being warmed up from the bottom of his heart.

It must have been because she had simply wanted to serve Hakurei something warm with no ulterior motives whatsoever. Hakurei had forgotten about the very existence of such unadulterated kindness. However, Hakurei’s heart quickly grew cold again. As soon as the warmth had disappeared from his belly, the cold sensation, as if his blood wasn’t reaching his limbs, had returned.

I need to do something, he decided, though he still had slight feelings of loathing and hesitation. He had thought that, if necessary, he would easily be able to do anything, with no pangs of conscience to speak of, so these feelings surprised even himself.

“Now this won’t do. Is a bowl of soup really enough to win you over?” he mumbled to himself as he started walking again.



Jotetsu narrowed his eyes as he watched Hakurei leave the room.

I’m kind of interested in what’s going on in his head... But first, I need to look into Setsu Rimi once again.

Perceptively noticing that Jotetsu was deep in thought, Shohi looked dubiously at him.

“What is it, Jotetsu?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Your Majesty. Anyway, I have something else to take care of, so I’ll be leaving now.” Jotetsu threw Shohi a grin before he started to leave through the window he was sitting on.

“You are quite the busy one, I see. I do hear you have another master besides me, after all,” Shohi mused as he was leaving. Jotetsu jerked back and turned around in response.

“Have you been dissatisfied with my ten years of service?”

“No, I have not. It does not concern me whose orders you follow—as long as they do not serve to harm me.”

“I neither harm nor cure anyone. That’s the kind of man I am. You can rest assured,” Jotetsu responded jokingly. After leaving the room, he exhaled deeply and felt a chill. Shohi usually seemed as if he didn’t notice anything, but sometimes he could be alarmingly perceptive. However, he was also generous enough not to consider something a problem until he had a clear understanding of the matter.

“Now then, I guess I’m off to do my own job.”

After he descended into the garden below, Jotetsu took out the piece of paper he had hidden with his order written on it, tore it up, and threw the small pieces into the pond. The characters blurred, then disappeared completely.

To the east of the Konkoku capital, Anning, was a beautiful spring from which deep green water flowed ceaselessly, referred to as the Jade Spring. Protruding over the waters of the Jade Spring was the Palace of the Water Spirit, a remote palace that the emperor would retreat to during hot summers. Rimi was taken straight to the Palace of the Water Spirit without even returning to the rear palace. Her clothes, along with the pot of kaoridoko, had been brought from the rear palace for her.

As Rimi sat in front of the chest with her kaoridoko pot and clothes, going over its contents, she heard a small squeak. The skirts and shawls crammed into the chest started to move, and shortly after a creature with a long, silver body showed its head.

“Tama! You came too!” She picked up Tama and rubbed her cheek against her. The mere presence of such a cute creature made Rimi feel reassured.

“Rimi, the tributes from Wakoku have arrived.” Shusei suddenly appeared in the doorway to Rimi’s room, and Tama let out a quiet squeak before she quickly dove back into the chest. Shusei looked perplexed.

“Did something just move?”

“It’s the mouse I’m keeping as a pet. It’s cute. Its claws are sharp, but it’s soft, has big round eyes, and has a long body with short legs.”

“Based on what you just told me, that certainly doesn’t sound like a mouse. Are you sure that’s what it is?”

“Of course it is. I found it in a vegetable basket,” Rimi replied carefreely before she stood up and smiled softly. “Now then, I am going to the kitchen. I will prove to you that the gifts are high-grade ingredients right away.”

“Right away? What kind of magic are you going to use to make those slabs into food?” He asked in a dubious tone, but his face was brimming with curiosity for these unknown ingredients. He was only preventing himself from blatantly enjoying the situation out of respect for Rimi’s dire circumstances.

However, Rimi was not one bit worried. Proving it would be simple.

His Majesty gave me a week, but I won’t need nearly that much time. She wanted to shove proof that the gifts were ingredients in Shohi’s face as soon as

the next day if she could and make him regret that he had ever proposed to behead her so easily. She was secretly upset at Shohi, but those feelings were overpowered by the happiness she felt at getting to work with Wakokuan ingredients for the first time in a while. She smiled broadly.

The fact that she never got very angry, and that she didn't tend to hold grudges, may have been the reason why people thought she was lacking in the anxiety department. But perhaps the biggest reason for Rimi's mood being so good, which surprised even herself, was unmistakably because of Shusei's presence. Ever since that night in the pear garden, she had hoped to see him again.

Shusei followed Rimi toward the kitchen. They were alone in the palace. The kitchen was deserted and chilly. On the marble countertop were large piles of umifu and kengyoken.

"What is this bark and these scraps of wood really?"

"The thing that looks like bark is dried seaweed. It's called umifu. And what looks like scraps of wood is a fish called kengyo."

"I see, dried seaweed. That much I can tell, but this over here certainly doesn't look like fish..."

"You smoke the fish, add mold, and dry it until it's hard. Then it comes out like this. Are there no foods in Konkoku that you dry like this?"

"I've seen people who live by the coast dry clams, but they don't end up this hard. How are you even supposed to eat something this hard to begin with? Well, I suppose you could boil it in water until it turns soft and then use it for cooking."

"There are a lot of techniques, but generally, you don't eat the actual thing."

"They're food ingredients, but you don't eat them?"

"Correct. Just watch. To make use of the kengyoken, we need a tool to shave it into thin slices, but since we don't have that here... I'll start by proving to you that the umifu here is an actual ingredient."

Rimi filled a pot with water from a well in the kitchen. She then took a piece

of umifu and tore it into smaller pieces, wiped them with a clean cloth, and let them soak in the pot.

Now we wait for half an hour.

In the meantime, she lit a fire in the stove, while Shusei watched her with great interest. After half an hour the flame in the stove had grown large. She put the pot with umifu on the stove and removed it again just before the water started to boil. She then took the umifu out of the water.

“It’s done.” She poured the faintly colored water into a bowl and put it in front of Shusei.

“This is...hot water, is it not?”

“It is not. This is...” She attempted to explain that it was stock but found herself at a loss. She couldn’t think of what word to use for stock in Konkoku. “Um... How do you say the Wakoku word ‘stock’ in Konkoku?”

“‘Stock’? What’s that?” Shusei tilted his head in confusion. Seeing his reaction, Rimi understood that the concept of stock didn’t exist in Konkoku. The practice of first making a savory stock to then use in cooking was unknown to Konkokians.

“‘Stock’ is when you add flavor to water... Um, you make it taste like soup... Uh...”

“Are you referring to tang?”

“Yes, something like that.”

Konkoku did have savory soups as well, made by stewing various ingredients together. However, these stews were a complete dish in and of themselves; the cooking technique was not used for making standalone stock. Still, tang was the closest thing Konkoku had to stock.

“Tang is made by letting different kinds of vegetables and meats simmer for many hours, isn’t it? Can you really make it this easily?”

“Yes, you can, if you use this. Please, have a taste.” Rimi confidently presented Shusei with the dish, who took a sip, before falling silent for a moment. “How is it?”

“This is, without doubt, hot water.”

“What...? That can’t be!” Rimi took the bowl out of Shusei’s hands and took a sip herself. “But why? It tastes...kind of bitter...”

Out of shock, she dropped the bowl, which fell to the floor, shattering into many pieces and drenching the bottom of her skirt. Just as Shusei had said, this was nothing but faintly colored, lukewarm water. And it was bitter at that.

“So... It is bark, after all?” Shusei muttered, upon which Rimi desperately grabbed onto his collar and clung to him.

“W-W-Wait! Please wait! These are food ingredients! Please believe me!”

“Yes, I wish I could believe you, but...this is just hot water.”

“It... certainly is hot water. And bitter too.” Rimi released her grip on Shusei’s collar and heavily placed both her hands on the marble countertop. “This isn’t what was supposed to happen. Why did it turn out like this?”

“Do you have any idea what the cause might be? Maybe it became spoiled during the boat journey?”

“This is perfectly normal umifu. There’s nothing strange about it. So, why...?” Her optimistic feelings of making Shohi regret his statements had been wiped clean. At this rate, her body would be bidding farewell to her head in seven days’ time.

She turned her gaze to the pot containing the stock. On the continent, producing soup stock took a lot of effort, and required implementing techniques like simmering an entire seasoned chicken along with vegetables for many hours or boiling seafood. But Wakokuan stock could be made easily using only umifu or kengyoken. It was incredibly simple. All you needed for umifu stock was umifu and water. And the umifu had been brought straight from Wakoku—it was inconceivable for it to be the issue.

“Could it be...the water...?” She ran to the pail she had used to get water from the well and used a scoop to have a taste of it. The water had an intense, hard aftertaste.

“Rimi?” a concerned Shusei asked, to which Rimi turned around with great

force.

“The water! It’s the water that’s different, Master Shusei!” She pointed at the pail with shining eyes. Suddenly, she had a revelation, let out a gasp, and put her hand to her mouth. “Of course, now I see! This is why you go out of your way to buy water from the water merchants for tea!”

She had remembered her earlier issues with water orders during her work at the Food Service. In Konkoku there were two types of water, which is why they would buy water from water merchants. One type was the water used for cooking, which was pumped from the wells in the rear palace. Drinking it, you were left with an intense and bitter aftertaste. During cooking, this was not an issue, as you could add enough seasoning for it not to bother you. However, when it came to tea, the water would ruin the delicate taste. Thus, you would use a different, special kind of water specifically for tea. The tea in Konkoku tasted no different than in Wakoku to her, so the tea water must have been similar to Wakokuan water.

“There are two kinds of water. Is that not the case in Wakoku? There’s normal water, which you get from wells, and sold water, which water merchants collect from mountains.”

“There’s only one kind of water in Wakoku. It must be similar to sold water. Wakokuan stock can probably only be made with sold water!”

Rimi promptly tried to run out of the kitchen, but Shusei quickly grabbed her hand to stop her.

“Where are you going, Rimi?”

“To buy water!”

“You can’t do that. You do realize that you’re a captive here?”

“Oh... That’s right...” Rimi suddenly recalled the situation she was in and looked up at Shusei. “Then what should I do?”

“Listen, Rimi. Guardsmen are watching over the Palace of the Water Spirit. You mustn’t attempt to leave. I will arrange for the water.”



On a command from Shusei, a guardsman ran to buy sold water. It was already late evening when the water arrived, but Rimi lit candles and started working in the kitchen. She carefully tasted the water before smiling, seemingly satisfied. She relit the glowing ember in the stove, poured the water into a pot, and added the solid sheets that were the umifu.

Shusei watched Rimi work, intrigued. Rimi had claimed that the solid bark was actually seaweed, but Shusei had never come across seaweed that long and wide before in Konkoku. If that was the result after drying, it must have been truly enormous before being processed.

After letting the umifu soak in the water for half an hour, Rimi put the pot on the stove. She removed it again just before the water started to boil and took out the soggy umifu. That was all there was to it.

Will something like this really turn into tang? For the water to absorb the taste of the ingredients, it was vital to let it simmer for many hours, and a variety of ingredients were needed. Common sense said that what Rimi was doing would not produce tang but simple hot water.

“Have a taste, Master Shusei.” After she had poured the finished product into a bowl and tasted it herself, with a satisfied smile on her face, Rimi transferred what she referred to as “stock” into another bowl and handed it to Shusei.

Shusei accepted the bowl, and as he lifted it toward his mouth, he noticed a faint scent reminiscent of the seashore.

The scent of the seashore. Yet it doesn't smell fishy. How strange. He poured the faintly amber water into his mouth. As he did, an intense richness struck his tongue along with the scent. It wasn't a taste. He could taste neither salt, sweet, nor spicy—nothing that he recognized as a taste. Yet, he could feel some kind of sensation on his tongue, one he could only describe as “rich.” Despite being completely void of taste, it was akin to the aftertaste that remained after eating something delicious.

“This is...” Shusei's eyes widened in surprise. Rimi waited for his reaction with anticipation.

“How is it?”

“This is not hot water. Despite the complete lack of seasoning... It’s a wonderful tang.”

“Thank goodness. So it was the water after all.”

Shusei observed Rimi’s smiling face, feeling as if he had just discovered a strange creature. He had never before come across a woman who had made something through trial and error like this. Most noble women only worried about how flawlessly and beautifully they could execute established practices like manners, embroidery, and calligraphy. Seeing a woman who gave the process serious thought, tried new things, and made discoveries, almost like an immortal devising the elixir of life, was completely new to him. She was enjoying experimenting and thinking.

Shusei suddenly thought that she reminded him of himself. In his life, he had come across a number of people with whom he had felt he had something in common; however, they had all been men. Having something in common with a woman felt strange and intriguing to him.

She’s...a pretty interesting person. And these Wakokuan ingredients are even more interesting. Shusei grinned; his inner scholar was beyond himself with excitement. An object that did not even look like food could turn water into a wonderful tang by simply being steeped for a short while. It was far beyond the bounds of Konkokuan understanding. He found himself fascinated by these new ingredients.

“And those scraps of wood—I mean, that kengyoken, can it be used similarly to make a tasty tang?”

“Yes. However, first, we need a tool to shave thin slices from it. Like a tool used to shave wood.”

“You mean like the plane that carpenters use? Would that work?”

“Yes, that! That’s what I was referring to! That would be perfect!”

“Using woodworking tools for cooking... Quite fascinating indeed. Very well, I shall have one arranged.” Shusei turned his back to Rimi and started walking out of the kitchen to procure a plane.

A woodworking tool for cooking. How extraordinary. This will truly be

interesting. For the first time in a long while, Shusei was so thrilled that he almost burst out laughing.

However, suddenly, he heard the sound of a pot and bowl flipping over behind him. In the same instant, something hot poured over his right side, and he instinctively let out a shout as he jumped away. He turned around in surprise and found Rimi lying on the floor. The pot must have flipped over at the same time that Rimi collapsed, spilling the hot water on Shusei.

“Rimi?!”

Shusei felt a sharp pain on his right arm where the hot water had scalded him, but he was more concerned about whether the woman in front of him was hurt. He quickly ran over to her and found that, fortunately, no water had spilled on her. Yet for some reason, her eyes remained closed. She was unconscious.

III

Where is Lady Saigu? Rimi felt around the darkness for her Saigu sister. She stretched out her arms as far as she could manage, but there was nothing except empty darkness in front of her. Her uneasiness turned to fear.

“Lady Saigu!” she screamed.

“Rimi!”

Someone grabbed Rimi’s outstretched hand, and she woke up.

“Are you all right, Rimi?”

“Master Shusei...” Looking down at her as she lay in her bed, holding her hand, was none other than Shusei. “I... Huh? What?”

As Rimi was unable to grasp the situation, Shusei carefully lowered her hand and placed it on top of the bedspread. He then removed the sword he was wearing and placed it on the floor against the wall.

“I’ll never get used to swords,” he said with a dejected smile before he sat down on the chair next to Rimi’s pillow. He was a civil official, but he wore a sword for protection when he went out. “I had a doctor come and look at you,

and apparently, it was anemia. Come to think of it, you've spent the day being threatened with decapitation, moving to a palace you've never been to before, and just generally having a miserable time. It's no surprise. For now, you should rest."

"But the proof..."

"His Majesty gave us seven days. Today is still only the first. Not to mention, out of the two dishes, I have already confirmed the taste of the first. There's only one dish to go, so surely it won't hurt you to sleep for today." Shusei paused for a moment, before continuing to speak. "I heard you mention a 'Lady Saigu' a moment ago. Who is that exactly?"

"That is what we call the shrine maiden who serves Kunimamori-no-Ōkami. She's my older sister. My job was to offer food to the god and at the same time that food was also given to Lady Saigu. In practice, my duty was to make food for Lady Saigu. That duty is what granted me a place where I belonged, alongside Lady Saigu." Despite usually being described as absentminded, it was not as if Rimi had no feelings of her own. As scatterbrained as she was, she still had her worries. She would always worry, absentmindedly, if she really belonged.

That was a result of her upbringing. As a child, she had always felt out of place. After becoming the Umashi-no-Miya at the age of seven and feeling that she could be of use to her Saigu sister, she had come to feel relieved as long as she was by her sister's side—that it was all right for her to be there. However, the anxiety that had taken root in her as a child had slowly turned into a baseless worry that her Saigu sister would one day disappear, once again leaving her without a place to call home.

And then, that absentminded worry became a reality. However, it was not her sister, but herself who had to leave Lady Saigu's side. As the new emperor of Konkoku ascended to the throne, the Wakokuan emperor found himself having to send one of his princesses to Konkoku as a tribute. However, Rimi's older sisters were already married, and the Saigu could not simply abandon her sacred post to go to a foreign country.

Thus, the task fell on Rimi. When she had first learned about it, she had been

aghast. She had finally found a place where she belonged, only to lose it again. However, having realized that there was no use in simply wallowing in her grief, she had put her natural carefreeness to use and accepted it. Struggle as she might, she was the only person who could do it. All she could do was steel herself.

“Having a place you belong because you have a duty... I understand how you feel. I’m not unlike you myself.”

Rimi meant to ask Shusei what he had meant by that, but the words got stuck in her throat as she noticed the bandages wrapped around his arm from his wrist all the way up to his elbow.

“Master Shusei, what happened to your arm?”

Shusei smiled awkwardly as if trying to say that it was nothing when Rimi remembered something and turned pale.

“Don’t tell me it’s from when I collapsed?” Just before she had lost consciousness, she had noted the danger of standing so close to a pot filled with hot water. It must have flipped over the moment she collapsed and splashed Shusei with the water. “It’s all my fault, isn’t it? I’m so sorry, Master Shusei... I’ve injured you...”

“I’m fine. The doctor said it wasn’t that bad of a burn. It likely won’t even leave a scar.”

“But... I... I’m so terribly sorry...” Rimi felt the area around her eyes becoming hot. She had injured the one person who had been kind to her here in Konkoku, and she couldn’t stand the feeling of guilt. He had looked after her, only to be injured in the process. “I’m sorry, Master Shusei...”

In the end, Rimi felt like she was nothing but a nuisance, both to Konkoku and to Shusei. Perhaps there really was no place for her in this country. These feelings that she had bottled up and pretended not to notice suddenly welled up. As if something inside her had burst, the reality of having been separated from her Saigu sister suddenly hit her, and she was unable to hold back her tears.

Why...? This isn’t like me... It was as if her anemia had made even her

emotions unsteady. She felt herself tearing up, quickly turned her face away from Shusei, and forced her eyes shut. *I'm the kind of person who when told to enjoy something simply replies "yes" and smiles goofily...and yet...*

She had wanted to enjoy life here. That's what her sister had told her to do, after all. She had wanted to act tough, just like how her sister did when she had cheered Rimi up. And her feelings had not changed. However, just as she had tried her best to keep herself from drowning in a country where she had trouble even speaking the language, she had nearly been sentenced to decapitation due to a simple cultural difference. And now she had even managed to injure the one person who had been kind to her. She couldn't even begin to hope to find a place she belonged at this rate. This was not a place that would welcome Rimi with open arms. She had become a nuisance again, just like when she was young. With this feeling in her chest, even the usually carefree Rimi felt as though her heart would wither away.

Lady Saigu... There's no place for me anywhere anymore...

Suddenly, Shusei spoke to her.

"It tasted good."

Rimi quickly opened her eyes.

What did he just say? Still faced away from Shusei, she focused her ears on what Shusei had to say.

"The tang you made using the gifts from Wakoku. All I could see looking at it was bark, yet by your hands, it turned into a delicious tang. It was incredibly fascinating. Despite not tasting a thing, I could feel this strange sense of deliciousness."

Shusei was trying to change the subject, as he saw that Rimi had started crying. But the first thing that left his mouth made Rimi feel as though she was being gently embraced. He had said that "it tasted good." With no particular motive other than to change the subject, he had said what was on his mind.

Tears of a different kind started welling up from her burning eyes. Something many times larger than her previously crushed feelings felt as though it was slowly rising from the bottom of her throat. She held her blanket to her face as

she wept.

Bewildered, Shusei tried to get a look at Rimi.

“Rimi? Did I say something mean?”

Still hiding her face, Rimi shook her head back and forth.

“No, I... I’m just... I’m just... so happy...”

Rimi sensed that Shusei was smiling in relief while his hand patted her head.

“For now, just relax and sleep, Rimi. I look forward to witnessing another of your feats tomorrow,” Shusei whispered gently, before falling silent. Rimi looked up from her blanket to find Shusei shockingly close to her face.

“It seems you can’t quite stop crying. I’m afraid I’m not very familiar with how to cheer up a lady. They call me the Loveless Scholar, after all. Even so, I did learn a thing or two about how to handle women as part of my education. If you wouldn’t mind *that*...”

“Education?”

Shusei touched Rimi’s shoulder with one hand and grabbed the slender hand that was holding Rimi’s blanket with the other.

“I was told that to comfort a noblewoman, you are to touch them like this. This is apparently common sense when you want to reassure a woman.”

This was nothing less than a lover’s embrace. Whoever “educated” Shusei on this matter must either have been rather dimwitted or was toying with him.

“I...don’t think this is quite common sense.”

“Is it different in Wakoku? I was taught that this was the correct and courteous way to act when comforting a woman, even if she is of a social standing where you would normally have to show discretion. Like this...”

Their eyes met. Rimi could feel her heart beating harder. Still touching her hand and shoulder, Shusei slowly moved closer to Rimi’s face, as if intending to comfort her with a kiss.

“Ah... Master Shusei... This is...definitely wrong...” Rimi’s voice was trembling, while Shusei remained silent. Shusei was almost close enough for his breath to

touch Rimi’s lips.



Just then, something soft suddenly blocked Rimi's mouth.

"Ah!" Shusei let out a surprised shout and jumped back, while Rimi similarly jumped up in shock, and her tears stopped abruptly. The silver, furry creature that had affixed itself to Rimi's face dropped down on her lap.

"T-Tama?! I'm so sorry for scaring you, Master Shusei! This is the mouse I told you about."

As Shusei turned his gaze to Rimi's lap, his jaw dropped.

"Is that...a divine dragon?!"

"Yes, that's right, I'm so sorry! She usually never plays tricks like this. She never intimidates people, she's a really well-behaved mouse! But...huh?" Rimi blinked a few times, dumbfounded, and looked up at Shusei. "Did you just say... divine dragon?"

"That's...a divine dragon. Namely, the divine dragon that has been kept by the emperor of Konkoku for generations, the Quinary Dragon..."

"What? Tama is? A divine dragon? A dragon?" She looked straight at Shusei.

Suddenly, the long creature with soft, silver fur stood up, stood up in a dignified pose on top of Rimi's lap. She let out a slightly more ferocious squeak than usual. Not that there was a hint of intensity or divinity to it.

Chapter 5: The Emperor Who Doesn't Know Good Food

I

"Where did the Quinary Dragon come from?" Shusei asked as if he was questioning Rimi, who looked confused.

"But I thought this was some kind of rare mouse from Konkoku..."

"You thought *that* was a mouse?! Have a good look at it. It has jewels under its five claws, proof that it's the divine dragon that has been passed down to the emperor of Konkoku for generations—the most distinguished of all divine dragons, the Quinary Dragon."

"But isn't she a bit too pet-like to be a divine beast?"

"I won't deny that. I only knew that it was the Quinary Dragon because I've seen it in His Majesty the Emperor's quarters before. But how in the world did you convince yourself that this was a mouse? Rimi, where did you find the Quinary Dragon?"

"Um... I picked her up in the kitchen."

"You're saying a divine dragon just happened to be lying around?"

"Yes! She really did just happen to be in the vegetable basket in the kitchen. And then I picked her up because she was cute." Still in her bed, Rimi let out a quick laugh in an attempt to lighten the awkward mood. Shusei then put his hand to his forehead as if he suddenly got a bad headache.

"Anyway, I'll take care of the Quinary Dragon and make sure that it finds its way back to His Majesty," Shusei said and took a step forward. In response, Tama let out a squeak and fled to Rimi's shoulder. Shusei frowned as he reached out toward Rimi's shoulder, only for Tama to jump down Rimi's back.

"Quinary Dragon!" Losing his temper, Shusei threw himself toward Tama. In

the process he fell onto the bed on top of Rimi. She let out a scream and Shusei apologized absentmindedly as Tama made her way under Shusei's arm. She took shelter beneath the flailing Rimi's skirt.

"Ah! Tama?!"

"There you are!" Shusei shouted as he tried to lift Rimi's skirt with no ulterior intentions whatsoever.

"Help! Master Shusei!" Rimi instinctively slapped Shusei right in the back of his head. Shusei groaned as he seemed to come to his senses, and he released his grip on Rimi's skirt. He then noticed that he was pinning Rimi down and hurried to get back on his feet.

"I'm truly sorry about that, Rimi." Shusei retreated three steps from the bed. As he did, Tama showed her face from under Rimi's skirt and let out a small high-pitched laugh. At a loss, Shusei hung his head.

"Why is the Quinary Dragon so attached to you?"

"I-I'm not sure... Maybe because I gave her food?" Rimi hurriedly straightened out her skirt and sat up with a perplexed look. Tama rummaged around under her skirt and tickled Rimi. She seemed to have no intention whatsoever of getting caught by Shusei.

"Food..." Shusei sighed wearily.

"Master Shusei, the Quinary Dragon is a divine dragon, right? She should be by His Majesty's side, right?"

"That's correct. This divine dragon has belonged to the emperor of Konkoku for generations. It's kept in a silver cage and handed to the new emperor upon his ascension to the throne."

"Then how did she end up in my hands? She's supposed to be in a cage, isn't she?"

"It was stolen by someone on the very day of His Emperor's ascension."

Tama crawled out from under Rimi's skirt and jumped up on her shoulder. She wrapped Rimi's long hair around herself as she stared at Shusei vigilantly. Shusei sat down next to Rimi and spoke in a resigned tone.

“Don’t worry, Quinary Dragon. I won’t try to capture you anymore. You’ve made it more than clear that you don’t wish to be separated from Rimi.”

“Master Shusei, who in the world could have stolen her?”

“I don’t know. There *is* someone who has acted suspiciously and whose background is unclear... But I can’t simply suspect someone with no solid proof.” Shusei furrowed his brow. “The Quinary Dragon’s cage is always in the emperor’s bedroom. After His Majesty returned from his ascension ceremony, the door to the cage was open, and the Quinary Dragon was nowhere to be seen. The Quinary Dragon is said to provide the emperor the power to rule over Konkoku. The first emperor, Jinso, only became the emperor after being chosen by the Quinary Dragon. The Quinary Dragon disappearing is a serious emergency. The only people who know about it are me, Chancellor Shu, the palace attendant Hakurei, and Jotetsu. We have searched as hard as we could without any leads, and it has been weighing on His Majesty’s mind ever since his ascension.”

“But now that you’ve found Tama, everything will be alright, won’t it? Should we let His Majesty know right away, so he can come and pick her up?”

“I wish I could... But the Quinary Dragon refuses to leave your side. If His Majesty were to come across this sight, he would have you killed on the spot.”

“Would he be jealous because Tama likes me? Well, I guess I should expect that from...” Rimi tried to air her grievances, but Shusei quickly stopped her.

“If you want to criticize His Majesty, do it euphemistically. Otherwise, you’ll definitely be executed for disrespecting him this time.”

“Oh, I see. His Majesty is an absolutely wonderful, depraved-like, and sadist-like person.”

“Rimi, as I’ve told you once before, your slander just turned even sharper. Your Konkokuan becomes questionable every so often, and if you don’t work on fixing it, you’ll end up cut down by His Majesty one day. The reason His Majesty would have you executed is not that he’s sadistic or jealous of you. It’s because if word gets out that the Quinary Dragon has chosen you, certain people will start to propose that you should become the empress.”

“Me? An empress?!” Rimi became wide-eyed at the absurd proposition.

“And His Majesty would want to prevent that in advance. That’s just how important the Quinary Dragon is.”

“What? So you mean if Tama doesn’t return to His Majesty, I’ll be killed?”

“Correct.”

“T-T-T-Tama!” Rimi tried to pick up Tama from her shoulder, but Tama swiftly escaped her hands and once again found her way into Rimi’s skirt as Rimi let out a scream. Rimi held down her skirt as she looked desperately at Shusei.

“Master Shusei! Please help me! Tama is in my skirt!”

“I’m afraid it’s awfully difficult for me to help you in these circumstances. I have no plan on thrusting my hands or head under your skirt. And even if I did, I doubt the Quinary Dragon would behave.”

“So I have no option but to be killed by His Majesty?”

“The Quinary Dragon seems to refuse to leave your side. Put another way, that means we always know where the Quinary Dragon is, so there is no need for panic. I’ll keep this hidden from His Majesty for the time being while we try to come up with a plan, such as you convincing the Quinary Dragon or attaching the Quinary Dragon to His Majesty somehow. Being killed just from the Quinary Dragon having taken a liking to you would be too cruel a fate.”

“Thank you, Master Shusei...but...Tama, why my skirt?”

As Rimi squirmed from being tickled by Tama, Shusei knelt down by Rimi’s feet and moved his head closer to her skirt.

“It doesn’t seem to be coming out anytime soon.”

Suddenly, an exasperated voice could be heard in the bedroom.

“Just what do you think you are doing, Shusei?”

Rimi and Shusei turned their eyes toward the doorway and immediately turned speechless.

“You, the Loveless Scholar, attempting to kiss the hem of a woman’s skirt? Now that is a sight to behold.” Entering the room as he spoke in an arrogant

tone was the strikingly beautiful Emperor Shohi.

His Majesty! Rimi almost became dizzy from the confusion. *What is His Majesty doing here?! And wait, if he finds Tama, won't I be cut down by this sadistic emperor on the spot?!*

II

Rimi sat on her bed, trembling and teary-eyed. Noticing this, Shusei, still on the floor, gently put his hand on her knee, silently signaling for her to remain as she was. His hand still on Rimi's knee, he greeted Shohi with a composed expression.

"Why are you here, Your Majesty? You're not by yourself, are you? Where are your guardsmen and aides? Where is Jotetsu?"

Shohi seemed to be unaware of Tama, not so much as glancing toward Rimi's skirt.

"My followers are far too bothersome. I had them wait by the gate. Jotetsu is waiting outside as well. I came hoping to witness whatever miracle would turn that bark and wood scraps into food."

Despite how insistent he had been about having Rimi's head chopped off, there was no hint of guilt or shame on Shohi's face. He must have thought that he had done nothing wrong to begin with. *Treating peoples' lives as if they were nothing is quite the display of coldheartedness*, Rimi thought.

"However, it seems I was able to witness something even better," Shohi smirked, as he walked up next to the kneeling Shusei. He gazed at the teary-eyed Rimi, gripped her jaw with one hand, and turned her face to him. "This is the woman that enticed the Loveless Scholar? Her skin is indeed beautiful. Does it really taste that good?"

Shohi closed in on Rimi, his lips nearing her cheek.

Help! He's going to kill me! Rimi was more concerned about Tama, who was still hiding under her skirt, than anything improper that Shohi was doing. She was paralyzed by fear. However, just before Shohi's lips could touch Rimi, Shusei grabbed his arm.

“Your Majesty, I think your jesting has gone far enough.”

“Why? This woman was sent from Wakoku to join my rear palace. She belongs to me.”

“Please don’t use her simply to make fun of me, Your Majesty.” Shusei threw Shohi a stern look, and Shohi responded with a faint sneer before he released his hold on Rimi’s jaw.

“You seem serious about her, Shusei.”

“I need to be serious right now, for a variety of reasons. I will show you to the balcony. I have already been able to confirm that the Wakokuan bark is edible. We will show it to Your Majesty.”

“That was fast. Is that woman truly a sorcerer after all?”

“It’s simply a Wakokuan cooking technique. She will explain. Rimi, I will now take His Majesty to the balcony. You go back to the kitchen and make the tang from before, and then we’ll have His Majesty try it. Can you do that? Do you have anything you need to take care of?”

By something to take care of, he must have been referring to Tama. He was saying that he would take Shohi out of the room for a while, during which Rimi could hide Tama. She would then make some umifu stock to present to Shohi.

“Y-Yes, I can do it!” Rimi nodded, at which Shusei started leading Shohi out of the room.

“Thank goodness...” Exhausted, Rimi lay down on her bed as Tama came out from under her skirt and dove under the blanket. Apparently, desperate not to be found by Shohi, Tama seemed to have been taking refuge on her own.

“You’re very clever, Tama. But why is someone as clever as you so opposed to being caught by His Majesty?”

Letting out a deep sigh of relief, Rimi stood up and took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm herself. This was the perfect chance. She had to present Shohi with the finest umifu stock she could make and leave him speechless, giving him no choice but to apologize for having commanded to have her head cut off. After all, Shusei had already endorsed this Wakokuan flavor.

Rimi fired herself up and set off for the kitchen. She had already used the stove that evening, so the fuel was still glowing. She got a flame going and soaked the umifu in water. She then put the pot on the stove and removed it again just before it came to a boil. She poured the clear, golden stock into a white bowl and put it on a tray. Finally, she quietly carried the tray to the balcony.

The balcony was built above the clear Jade Spring. The moon shone bright, and the moonlight seemed to reach down into the waters as a single, narrow path of light. A gentle breeze touched the surface and created small waves upon which the moonlit path danced. Rimi placed the porcelain bowl in front of Shohi, who was sitting by a table on the balcony.

“I’ve made this using the tributes from Wakoku. Please have a taste, Your Majesty.”

Shohi casually picked up the bowl and took a sip. He furrowed his brow as he took another sip, followed by another and another. Suddenly, out of nowhere...

“It’s nothing but hot water!” He threw the bowl onto the floor of the balcony and stood up, kicking the chair behind him. “Are you trying to make a mockery out of me?! I commanded you to use the Wakokuan tributes to make something that tasted good, and all you have to offer is hot water?!”

“Your Majesty, this is not hot water. It’s a rich tang,” Shusei hurriedly tried to intervene, but Shohi’s anger did not subside.

“You call this tang?! Why do you take that woman’s side, Shusei?!”

Why...? Shusei had recognized that it was a wonderful tang, so why did Shohi say it was just hot water?

“It is nothing but tasteless hot water!”

Rimi had a sudden realization. It was the taste.

“It’s because you’re not used to it!” Rimi instinctively raised her voice.

“What did you say?”

“Your Majesty isn’t used to this taste. Konkokuan food is made from that heavy water and made to taste really strong! This only tastes like hot water to

you because you're not used to Wakokuan food!"

Shusei was a cuisinologist. Since he worked by researching food, he had a delicate sense of taste and was attentive to the flavor of his food. He was special. Most people from Konkoku were so used to the strong taste of Konkokuan food that when given unseasoned umifu stock, it tasted like nothing but hot water to them. That must have been it.

"So in the end, Wakoku sent scrap that a person from Konkoku cannot even taste as tributes!" Shohi placed his hand on the sword hanging from his hip.

In a way, he might actually be right?! Oh no, he's actually going to kill me! Rimi quickly steeled herself.

"Rimi!" Shusei shouted in a strained voice. Having heard his voice, Rimi suddenly remembered what he had said a moment ago—that it had tasted good. If there were people who enjoyed her food, then perhaps she did have a place where she belonged. It was still too early to give up.

I still have a chance! Shusei had instilled her with hope. She spoke as if blocking Shohi's sword.

"No, Your Majesty! I still have six days! I will prove that good food can be made from the Wakokuan tribute!" Rimi looked straight at Shohi.

She was not confident that she could produce something that would satisfy him. But it was at the very least worth a try. And this was a matter of food, no less—if she simply gave up and let her head be cut off without even having attempted to fight back, then what had her ten years as an Umashi-no-Miya been for? If her Saigu sister got word that Rimi'd had her head cut off without a fight, she was sure to become furious. So she had to try.

Shohi confronted the resolute Rimi.

"Can you do it? Can you really prove it? Woman...what was your name?" Shohi asked, as if he for the very first time recognized that the person in front of him was an actual human being.

"Yes, I can. My name is Setsu Rimi, Your Majesty."

Shohi scoffed as he sat back down. He rested his chin in his hand and turned

his gaze toward the sparkling, moonlit spring.

“I was assured that I would have something good to eat, yet it seems you only intend on serving me bad-tasting food.”

“In that case, I shall offer food that I specifically prepared for Your Majesty. I already have it ready right here in the palace. Please wait a moment,” Shusei said.

Shusei left the balcony, apparently confident that Shohi had calmed down.

Master Shusei...! Rimi came close to crying from how much she loathed being left alone with Shohi. Not able to withstand being quietly observed by the beautiful emperor, she tried to break the silence somehow.

“Um... Your Majesty, is there any particular food you like?” Given how he was demanding something that would suit his tastes, he must have had some preferences of his own. However...

“There is no food that I like,” he said, landing a decisive blow on Rimi. She felt her hope being shattered.

“What about sweets?”

“Neither when it comes to food or sweets have I ever had something I like in particular, nor have I thought of them as tasting good.”

“What...? In other words, Your Majesty has a magnificent lack of taste?” She tried asking something impolite in as polite a manner as she could manage. She became nervous, afraid that she had said something incorrect. However, this was something she needed to know. After all, Shohi had commanded her to present him with something that tasted good, but if he had no sense of taste, it didn’t matter what food Rimi presented him—he would never consider it tasty regardless. In other words, his demand would have been impossible from the very start.

“A ‘magnificent lack of taste’?” An ominous light flashed in Shohi’s eyes, but perhaps having seen how serious Rimi’s expression was, he chose to answer. “I do have a sense of taste. I simply have never considered any food to taste good. That is all.”

“Oh no... That’s so sad...” Rimi couldn’t stop herself from speaking.

“Sad?” Shohi looked as if he had come across a baffling creature.

“If you can’t enjoy your food, you lose half of what makes life great.”

“I see. To you, food makes up half of your life. Ridiculous,” Shohi scoffed, but Rimi simply nodded vigorously. She didn’t care how much she was mocked—to Rimi, that was the truth.

“Yes. People have to eat to survive.” Not being able to enjoy anything you ate struck Rimi as tremendously sad.

“Not that you can be sure that you will be surviving once these seven days are up.”

“Yes... That’s true...” Having heard Shohi say something so cruel so carelessly, Rimi suddenly felt drained of energy. This emperor was one who could talk familiarly with someone one second and threaten to have their head cut off the next without batting an eye. Few people possessed such coldheartedness. What bothered Rimi the most was how he spoke as if there was nothing wrong with what he was saying.

Just what was this emperor’s childhood like? Rimi couldn’t help but wonder. He could say the cruelest things with a completely innocent look on his face. Rimi found it hard to understand how his mind worked.

“What was Your Majesty’s mother like?” Rimi asked, prompting Shohi to direct his gaze toward the surface of the dark Jade Spring.

“She was a foolish, hopeless woman. I am happy that she is gone.”

What? Rimi was left speechless at Shohi’s statement, completely devoid of any love for his parent.

Just then, Shusei returned to the balcony, holding a tray on which sat a small porcelain jar and a teacup.

“I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Your Majesty,” he said as he placed the tray on the table and poured the contents of the jar into the teacup. A thick, black-blue liquid exited the mouth of the jar and filled the teacup to the brim. Shusei proudly presented the cup to Shohi. “Please enjoy, Your Majesty.”

“And what is this?” Shohi asked with overwhelming suspicion, but he still took up the teacup and brought it to his mouth surprisingly obediently. As he prepared to take a sip, Shusei replied confidently.

“That is a drink meant to stimulate your mental development. It’s brined fish eyes.”

“This is revolting! Not to mention sickening!” With all the force he could muster, Shohi threw the teacup off the balcony. The young, angry emperor then immediately left the palace.

III

“Um... Master Shusei? Are you all right?”

Shusei was standing hunched down, both hands on the table in disappointment over how his fish eyes had been received.

“That drink was rather promising. I only completed it recently, after many years of research. I tested it on a pair of twins, having one of them drink it for three years and comparing their intelligence once a year.”

“Master Shusei, is that what you are giving His Majesty for his meals?” If that was what Shohi was forced to eat every day, it was nothing short of harassment.

“The cooks are responsible for his breakfast and lunch menus, while for dinner, the cooks prepare a meal from ingredients carefully selected by me. Today’s meal was made from a very rare ocean fish.”

“So... Does His Majesty actually like the food you give him?” Rimi asked timidly.

“He has never said anything to that effect. He always covers his food with unreasonable amounts of spicy xinciyu before eating it.”

No wonder, Rimi thought, somehow relieved.

“Not only that, he has never expressed any fondness for the food made for him by the cooks either. He does often call it disgusting, though... No matter how delicious, luxurious, or rare the food is, he never claims to like it. I’ve never

heard him call anything delicious as long as I've known him."

Shohi had said something similar only a moment ago.

"Ever since he was young?" Rimi asked.

"As far as I'm aware, never in his entire life." Shusei sighed.

"So His Majesty ordered me to make something that tasted good, despite not finding any food tasty to begin with?" Rimi asked indignantly.

"No, he's not quite that unreasonable. He wants you to present him with something that he can at least taste. His Majesty doesn't himself believe that he could find anything delicious."

So he just wants me to make something that's at least edible? That's... A troublesome impulse that lived deep inside her was awakening. That's pathetic. Making food that's nothing more than "edible" is just pathetic.

What she told herself in her head was similar to a scolding she had received long ago from her Saigu sister.

"I don't want merely edible food from you. I want something that tastes good. And it's your duty to make it," the Saigu had said.

"I don't want to make food that's simply edible," Rimi insisted.

"But His Majesty has never found something delicious in his entire life."

"There must be a reason why he can't enjoy his food. When I first joined the rear palace myself, I lost my sense of taste, and was unable to enjoy any food."

"You went through something like that? So when we met for the second time, you had lost your sense of taste?"

"Yes. However, by eating food from my home country, my sense of taste slowly revived. And ever since I met and spoke to you again, my sense of taste grew even more responsive, and..." Rimi stopped herself, as she started to feel as if she was subtly confessing her love for him, and her cheeks turned red. Shusei himself seemed to feel a little awkward as he cleared his throat.

"That's good to hear. I'm glad that I was of some use to you."

"A-Anyway, I'm sure His Majesty has some reason that he can't enjoy food."

A part of Rimi was excited. She understood that if she could not get the emperor to recognize the tributes as high-grade ingredients before seven days had passed, she would lose her head. And the only way to avoid that was to make something that would satisfy Shohi. But despite her life being at stake, the urge to hear Shohi praise her food overshadowed any fear she had.

“So I will find out what that reason is and make food that even His Majesty will like.” Her eyes glowed with inquisitiveness and a strong desire to face the challenge ahead of her.

“How strange... I already felt it in the kitchen yesterday, but your gaze is like that of a pursuer of the sciences. You almost remind me of myself.” Shusei showed Rimi a faint, resigned smile. “I understand how passionate you are. However, for the time being, our first priority is ensuring that your head remains attached to your body. I will help you. After all, from what I’ve heard, you are a Wakokuan immortal in charge of providing holy communion for the gods. I have great interest in your methods as the scholar who started the field of culinology.”

Why can't His Majesty enjoy food?

After having collapsed from anemia only to be visited by Shohi soon after, Rimi was thoroughly exhausted. Shusei had told her to rest for the day, so she was now lying down on her bed. By her pillow, Tama was lying rolled up comfortably, breathing in her sleep. Rimi found Tama’s slow, regular breathing pleasant to listen to.

Shusei had gone to rest in a bedroom in a different palace building. The guardsmen at the gate had lit a fire, but there were no handmaids here. There were supposedly some servant men and women in the palace, but at night they would leave for their own homes. It was awfully quiet. Normally there would be both handmaids and servants around, but Rimi was currently half considered a criminal, so this was only natural.

The moonlight peeked through the gaps of the closed door and drew a beautiful, straight line of light on the ceiling. Rimi observed it as she pondered, *Just like when I first joined the rear palace, is there...is there something hidden*

in His Majesty's heart?

She listened to the wind rattling the leaves of the trees outside, and before she knew it, she fell asleep.

“Setsu Rimi.”

Rimi's eyes twitched at the sound of a sweet voice whispering into her ear. She then opened her eyes wide in shock at the sight of the beautiful face that approached her.

“Master Hakurei...?!” Having found herself so close to a beauty far too intense for a wake-up call, she almost let out a voice close to a scream, but Hakurei covered her mouth with his hand.

“Shh. Quiet, Rimi.”

She tried to ask him why he was here and what he was doing, but behind Hakurei's palm, it all turned into indistinguishable mumbles. Illuminated by the moonlight, Hakurei looked frightfully beautiful and mysterious, almost like an actual spirit. He climbed up on the bed, placed himself over Rimi, and looked down at her face.

“Don't raise your voice, all right? If you promise me that, I'll remove my hand.”

Rimi nodded in response, and Hakurei slowly took away his hand.

“Master Hakurei, what are you doing here? How are you here?” Rimi asked in a whisper. Hakurei whispered back, close enough for Rimi to feel his breath.

“I bribed the guardsmen. I wanted to save you, see. Come with me, Rimi. I'll help you escape from here.”

“I... But...”

Hakurei must have been worried about Rimi. The thought made her happy. However, in these circumstances, it would have been more dangerous to run away. Were she to run away, she would have become a wanted woman, with no possible excuse—she would be executed without question. She was also currently in the care of Shusei. If she ran away, Shusei would be held responsible.

No, I can't do that. I don't want to trouble Master Shusei. Rimi shook her head.

"Thank you, Master Hakurei, but I can't come with you. If I do, Master Shusei will be in trouble."

"Shusei will be just fine. He's the son of the chancellor, and someone very important to His Majesty."

"But it would be more dangerous for me to run away. Right now I still have a chance of being forgiven. Running away would mean giving up on that chance."

For just a moment, Hakurei's expression seemed to have grown cold in the dark room.

"You mean you don't need my help?"

"That's not what I... It's just, I don't think running away is a good solution."

"Then what should I do? How can I help you, Rimi?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know—" Her voice trailed off in surprise. Hakurei had started stroking her across her back, then slowly moved to her arms. Wearing only a single layer, it felt as if his hands were touching her skin directly.

"I want to help you. But about the only thing I can do right now is to comfort you."

Sensing danger in his movements, Rimi attempted to struggle against him, but as Hakurei was pinning her down, she was unable to move.

"N-N-No, thank you! I don't need someone who looks as unwell as you to comfort me!" Hakurei looked as pale and unwell as ever.

"Really? Won't you give it a go, Rimi? If you give it a go, you might actually like it. I'll give it a go for you."

"I said no thank you..." Rimi tried to say, but before she could utter anything, Hakurei moved his mouth toward her neck, and she could feel his breath on her skin.

"Stop it!" In a sudden rush of fear, she became disoriented and ended up shouting in Wakokuan. Her mouth was immediately covered by Hakurei's hand

again.

“I told you to be quiet, didn’t I? Do you dislike me, Rimi?”

With Hakurei’s beautiful face above her, Rimi shook her head up and down. She owed him her life, but suddenly having something this ruthless done to her, she could very well come to hate him. Hakurei smiled sadly in response.

“Don’t worry, you’ll come to like me. Just you see.”

“I wonder about that, Hakurei,” a voice as cold as ice was suddenly uttered above them. Straining her eyes, Rimi noticed a sword being held to Hakurei’s neck. She looked up behind Hakurei and found the intelligent scholar Shusei was standing there in the dark, wearing a single layer of nightwear with his hair down. He must have just woken up and made for Rimi’s room. Holding his sword against Hakurei, he looked down at him with eyes as icy as his blade.



“Oh? Now how did you realize I was here? I thought you were sleeping in a different building,” Hakurei said as he stood up from the bed with no care for the blade currently placed next to his neck.

“Someone was kind enough to wake me up and alert me to Rimi’s emergency.”

Rimi readjusted the front of her shirt as she fled to the end of the bed and curled up. As she wondered who could have alerted Shusei, she noticed that Tama was nowhere to be seen.

Did Tama alert Shusei for me?

Despite having escaped the emergency, Rimi was still trembling. She had never been touched in that way before. It had been frightening. Having noticed Rimi’s trembling, Shusei confronted Hakurei with a furious expression on his face, his sword still held against him.

“Why did you do this, Hakurei? This is not like you at all.”

“A sword doesn’t suit a scholar like you. Would you mind putting that thing down?”

Shusei’s look turned even sterner as Hakurei casually attempted to change the subject.

“I asked you, why did you do this?”

“I came to save someone dear to me. At this rate, Rimi will have her head chopped off, you know.”

“That’s a lie. There is no way that you don’t understand that her escaping would just make matters worse. And for all your claims of wanting to save her, that is certainly not what it looked like you were doing.”

“Well, Rimi refused to run away, so I figured I’d at least comfort her.”

“That’s another lie,” Shusei declared in a stern voice. “You don’t seriously believe that you could comfort someone with such a foolish act. What are you after, Hakurei? Why did you try to take Rimi away from here? If you truly wanted to wrap her around your finger, all you would need is a few months, for you could win the heart of any woman. Why are you in such a rush that you

chose to attempt to place her under your control in such a forceful manner?”

“Under my control?”

“That’s the only explanation I can think of. Even I can tell how innocent Rimi is. If you made someone like her yours by force, she would be under your control out of fear and shame. Perhaps she would even start to feel a twisted form of affection toward you. This is not like you. You would never resort to such a forceful and barbaric measure.”

“Make her mine, you say?” Hakurei chuckled in a self-deprecating manner. “You do realize I’m a eunuch, Shusei? How exactly would I make her mine?”

“But is that really the truth? I have yet to confirm it for myself,” Shusei bit back.

A faint, sad smile surfaced on Hakurei’s face.

“Go home, Hakurei. Now.”

Chapter 6: In the Shadow of the Throne

I

“Are you all right, Rimi?”

After Hakurei had left, Shusei threw his sword on the floor and jumped up on the bed, holding Rimi to comfort her.

“That must have been terrifying. But don’t worry, I’m here now.”

The warmth of his embrace felt reassuring as a sense of relief spread through Rimi’s body, and she buried her face in Shusei’s chest. She sensed a refreshing aroma of agarwood coming from his garments.

“But why would Hakurei do something like this? What had him so frantic that he would try to assault you?” Shusei lamented while he continued to stroke Rimi’s hair to calm her down. “Where and how did you even meet Hakurei to begin with? All I’ve heard is that he owes you somehow.”

“I met him in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings. He seemed to be feeling very ill, so I made some soup for him to eat.”

“The kitchen?” Shusei asked in a perplexed tone. The kitchen was indeed not a place that high-ranking eunuchs would frequent; Rimi had thought it strange as well.

What was Master Hakurei doing there? And why did he investigate me and spread the rumor about the kaorizuke to improve my standing in the rear palace? He even held out a helping hand when I was in danger of being executed. But why...why has he been so kind to me? And then, despite his previous kindness, he had taken bizarre actions tonight.

Shusei had claimed that Hakurei’s actions were an attempt to control Rimi. If that was truly his intention, then everything he had done previously suddenly made sense. He had acted kindly to Rimi to get her to trust him, slowly putting her under his control.

“Was the kitchen the first time you met? Had you come across him before then somewhere?”

“No, I hadn’t. We met there for the first time, and ever since then, he’s been kind to me...”

“In that case, your meeting there must have been very significant to Hakurei in some manner, to the extent that he sought to control you.”

“Significant to him?”

Shusei was speaking of the significance of Hakurei having been in the small kitchen in the outskirts of the rear palace, a place he would normally never visit. There was nothing special about the kitchen—it was one of the many kitchens the palaces were equipped with. There was nothing particularly remarkable about it or the people who worked there. If there was anything unusual about it...

“Tama!” Rimi gasped as she looked up at Shusei. “One month before Hakurei appeared there, I found Tama in the very same kitchen!”

“The Quinary Dragon?”

They glanced at each other and realized that they were both thinking the same thing.

“Could it be that...Master Hakurei is the one who...”

“If he stole the Quinary Dragon and hid it in the rear palace, it must have either escaped somehow, or you just happened to find where he had hidden it in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings.” Shusei bit his lower lip. “It would have been fully possible for Hakurei to enter His Majesty’s bedroom. I did consider the possibility, but I didn’t want to doubt him...”

Hakurei stole the Quinary Dragon, and after hiding it in the rear palace, it had somehow escaped his grasp, only to be found by Rimi. Hakurei must have known that the Quinary Dragon was in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings and visited the kitchen from time to time in search of it. But he failed to find it and started fretting.

Then one day, Hakurei came upon Rimi. He suspected Rimi, who had

apparently frequented the kitchen many times before. He immediately started investigating her and must have heard of the silver mouse she was keeping in the process. Rimi had, after all, told the eunuchs about Tama when she had asked for permission to keep her.

“He wanted to win me over in order to take back Tama...”

Hakurei must have searched Rimi’s room too, but because of how clever Tama was, she had hidden from him.

“That explains it. When Jotetsu stole your kaoridoko, he must have thought that the Quinary Dragon was inside.”

Rimi’s eyes widened at Shusei’s suggestion. “You mean the person who stole my kaoridoko was Shin Jotetsu?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m really sorry about what he did.”

Jotetsu had previously stolen Rimi’s kaoridoko, believing that it was something else. He must have been searching for the Quinary Dragon. Rimi recalled him having asked, “It’s in there, is it?” Jotetsu had been observing Hakurei and found his behavior strange. After having heard that Hakurei had searched Rimi’s room, he must have assumed that he had been searching for the Quinary Dragon. Jotetsu had been partially correct.

Just like Jotetsu, Hakurei had been unable to find the Quinary Dragon. And so, he had attempted to ensnare Rimi to get her to confess where Tama was hiding. That was why he had acted so kindly to her. However, because of the tributes from Wakoku, Rimi was detained, and Hakurei must have panicked. In an attempt to save her, he had directed the emperor to call for Shusei and somehow managed to get through the council with Rimi still alive. Then, as Rimi was placed in a situation she could not escape from, he had attempted to take her away from the Palace of the Water Spirit to get her to reveal the location of Tama. However, Rimi had refused.

“But why would a palace attendant like Master Hakurei want the Quinary Dragon?”

“Perhaps it’s not so surprising. Hakurei has every reason to resent His Majesty.”

“What do you mean? I do remember Noble Consort So saying that Master Hakurei was special. What did she mean?”

“Hakurei... is His Majesty Ryu Shohi’s older half-brother.”



She had the nerve to call me sad. That woman... Setsu Rimi, was it?

Shohi was spending another evening alone polishing his sword on his bed. He observed the reflection of the candle flame as it danced on the blade and found it beautiful, even sweetly alluring, as he brought his lips close to the blade and let his tongue run across it. It was cold with a sharp metallic taste. He found it indescribably sweet and pleasing.

“It should just taste the same as this,” he spoke softly.

When Shohi had said that he’d never felt satisfied by his food, Rimi had said that was sad. Shohi could not understand what exactly was sad about it, but if Rimi wanted to present him with food that would satisfy him, a strong, inorganic taste like this blade would suffice. If he couldn’t find anything that tasted good, then he might as well just enjoy the coldness and strength of this taste.

Sad... Just what did she mean? Shohi did not understand the feeling of sadness. The only negative emotions that he was aware of were hatred and fear. Those were feelings he had felt intensely ever since he was a child. He had hated and feared so much that it had overwhelmed any other negative emotions. Perhaps he had also felt unhappy at times, but his hatred and fear had been too strong for him to remember.

“Mother, I’m scared,” he remembered having said often.

His mother had been Noble Consort En. She had always acted however she pleased in the rear palace. Shohi had hated and feared the way she had behaved. She had been too busy spreading spite, loathing, and malice around her to ever care for Shohi. At times she would beckon to him, only to show him something awful.

“Have a look over there, my dear Ko. Can you tell who is being led by the eunuchs?”

Whenever Noble Consort En had used Shohi's name "Ko," she had been in a terribly good mood. That day she had seemed to be in a particularly good mood, as she had referred to him as "my dear Ko."

"Brother Hakurei?"

At the age of five, his mother had on a rare occasion approached him and led him by the hand through the cloisters that led to the outer gate. After he had waited for a while together with Noble Consort En and her handmaids, a beautiful boy had been led through the inner gate by eunuchs. It was the son of Virtuous Consort Sai, Shohi's brother, who was six years older than him. His mother, Virtual Consort Sai, had died from illness two weeks prior, Shohi had heard.

Noble Consort En had hated Virtuous Consort Sai, so Shohi had never been close to Hakurei. However, every so often they would pass each other by while their mothers were away. When they did, Hakurei would always ask, "Hello, Shohi. How are you?" with a radiant smile. "When you become old enough to leave for the outer palace, let's play together," he would say softly but mischievously. Shohi had loved his pure, angelic smile. For Shohi, who otherwise spent his time looking at nothing but forced smiles and smugness, his smile was a breath of fresh air. So Shohi had liked Hakurei. He had always looked forward to the day he could leave for the outer palace to play with Hakurei.

"Where is Brother Hakurei going?" Shohi had asked with a worried voice, to which Noble Consort En had given an amused smile and replied softly.

"He's not going anywhere. In fact...can you hear? Listen carefully."

It had happened soon after Hakurei had been taken to the Department of Service by the eunuchs. Hakurei had let out a scream as if he was in his death throes. Shohi had suddenly become scared and stepped closer to his mother. But when he had looked up, the Noble Consort had been smiling as if she was enjoying a performance. She had started laughing heartily.

"Did you hear that scream?! He sounded like a chicken being strangled to death!"

Shohi had become confused and frightened.

“Mother, what was that? What happened to Brother Hakurei?”

“Well, you see, Hakurei is going to be a eunuch starting today. Oh, wait, I guess he already became one!” she had said as she continued her guffaw.

Shohi was horrified. He had suddenly become intensely scared of everything, hate filled him, and he felt any affection or love he’d had for his mother disappearing from his five-year-old body. Hakurei remained in the rear palace as a eunuch. However, Shohi was forbidden from calling him his brother and ordered instead to treat him as just another palace attendant.

Shohi only learned later that Hakurei’s mother, Virtuous Consort Sai, had not died from illness at all. She had taken her own life. As a result of one of Noble Consort En’s schemes, Virtuous Consort Sai had been accused of infidelity, and the emperor had been made to suspect that her son Hakurei was actually the son of some official. In order to prove her own innocence, Virtuous Consort Sai had chosen to end her life.

Upon the death of the Virtuous Consort, the emperor, seemingly regretting his own misgivings, had chosen to keep Hakurei alive. Some said he had not wanted to part with Hakurei’s beauty and intellect. However, as a result of the Noble Consort’s ardent wishes, and the fact that he couldn’t keep someone he had once doubted as his son, he had let Hakurei remain in the rear palace as a eunuch.

When Shohi had heard of this, he had simply, dispassionately, thought that his mother, Noble Consort En, was the kind of person to do that. She was someone whose purpose in life was to spread loathing and fear around her. From the bottom of his heart, he felt a hatred for his mother so intense he could vomit. So when she had fallen ill, he never bothered to even step foot in the rear palace. When he had been informed of her death a few years prior, he had only nonchalantly said, “I see.”

Eleven years had passed since the events, and Hakurei was still working in the rear palace as a eunuch. Clever by nature, he had quickly risen through the ranks until he had reached the highest rank of any palace attendant. When the idea had come from the Department of Service to make Hakurei a personal attendant of the newly ascended Shohi, many had been worried. It was only

natural for someone as brilliant as Hakurei to serve the emperor, but given Hakurei's background, there was no telling what might happen.

Shusei's father, Chancellor Shu, had been particularly against the idea.

"Simply the fact that Hakurei has served obediently for the past eleven years is a miracle in and of itself," the chancellor had said. "With His Majesty Shohi, the son of Noble Consort En, on the throne, there is no telling what Hakurei might do. As someone who has served as chancellor since the previous emperor, Hakurei's obedient demeanor seems to me as nothing but a display of his fear."

The previous emperor had avoided exiling Hakurei as a result of his remorseful feelings and because of Hakurei's own obedient demeanor. Shohi, however, had no such feelings of remorse, and the chancellor suggested that this was the perfect opportunity for Hakurei's much-needed exile from the court.

Even so, Shohi had made Hakurei his personal attendant. Chancellor Shu had asked him repeatedly why he had done it. Even the chancellor's son Shusei, who normally kept his head out of the workings of the court, had questioned him. But Shohi had simply responded, "I do not mind Hakurei." That was all there was to it. It was not worth the effort to have him exiled, and whatever he might be planning, Shohi was always on his guard. So he had not minded him. That was all he could respond with.

"Your Majesty."

As Shohi was observing his blade, Jotetsu had at some point entered the room and was kneeling by the window.

"What is it?"

"Hakurei is acting suspiciously after all. It seems he snuck into the Palace of the Water Spirit last night. It seems he has had a special interest in Setsu Rimi for some time."

"A special interest? Did he pay that palace woman a late-night visit in her bed? Even Shusei has taken a liking to her, after all."

"Chancellor Shu believes Hakurei might have been the one who stole the

Quinary Dragon.”

“So Shu Kojin is the reason you have been acting suspiciously as of late,” Shohi scoffed.

“Indeed.”

Just like Shusei, Shohi had also found Jotetsu’s conduct as of late strange.

“Did Kojin tell you that Hakurei is behind it? Shusei has also said in the past that it is possible he is behind it.”

“But Shusei is not like his father,” Jotetsu explained. “He doesn’t want to suspect Hakurei simply based on his background. Chancellor Shu, on the other hand, wants to investigate him thoroughly as long as the slightest possibility exists. If worst comes to worst, he might even plant some evidence of his own. Either way, Chancellor Shu suspected Hakurei from the very start and ordered me to investigate him in secret. I think he’s hiding the Quinary Dragon somewhere. The reason he’s so interested in Setsu Rimi may be that he has entrusted her with the Quinary Dragon.”

“You mean Setsu Rimi is hiding the Quinary Dragon?”

“I made contact with her once previously, but she seemed unaware of the situation herself. If he really has entrusted her with the Quinary Dragon, it must be in a way that she herself does not recognize.”

Chancellor Shu had always been wary of Hakurei. Every time anything happened, he would be quick to suggest to exile Hakurei, as if he was constantly waiting for the right opportunity. Shohi, however, was not very interested in the matter. It was almost as if he didn’t want to deal with the subject of Hakurei.

“There is no evidence. Without evidence, this is mere suspicion. But if it really is Hakurei who did it...”

Shohi swung his sword, cutting off the tip of the dancing candle flame.

II

“So it would not be strange at all for Hakurei to resent His Majesty. He likely

stole the Quinary Dragon,” Shusei explained on top of the bed after concluding his long account of Hakurei’s background.

Rimi had found it difficult to breathe as she listened to Shusei talk, and she subconsciously gripped her chest forcefully.

It hurts. Just having listened to the story was painful. Rimi shuddered to think how it might have felt for Hakurei himself.

“I had no idea they were brothers. They looked like nothing more than emperor and servant to me.”

“They’ve both been ordered to act in such a way for as much as eleven years now. It’s a very warped relationship. So it would be no surprise that His Majesty and Hakurei detest each other.”

“But why would His Majesty let Master Hakurei serve as his personal attendant, then?”

“He’s stubborn and indifferent by nature, you see. All he would say was ‘I do not mind Hakurei.’”

Was that really all there was to it? Would simple indifference make you let someone serve you who others said was dangerous? If you were truly indifferent, the path of least resistance would be to simply do as others recommended. There must have been a reason why he went out of his way to allow Hakurei to stay by his side, to say that he “did not mind.”

“But if he was just indifferent...” As Rimi clung to Shusei’s clothes, she suddenly noticed the skin between his neck and his chest. Seeing his exposed skin was rare, as he was usually fully covered up, and he seemed almost seductive. It was then that Rimi finally realized the situation she was in. She was lightly dressed and being held by Shusei. She started flushing.

“I-If he was just i-indifferent...”

“What’s the matter, Rimi?”

“I-It’s, it’s just... Master Shusei, you’re...you’re so close...”

“Close? Well, obviously, I’m currently holding you,” Shusei answered carefreely, but soon after he suddenly froze up, before quickly letting Rimi go

and jumping back as if he had touched something hot.

“I’m terribly sorry, Rimi! I had no ulterior motives! It’s true! I swear!”

“N-N-N-No, it’s—it’s fine! I’m the one who should apologize for clinging to you like that!”

“No, I should have shown better restraint! I’m sorry!”

“No, I—”

As the two of them apologetically bowed their heads over and over, a tiny squeak could be heard. With a hop, skip, and a jump, Tama entered the room.

“Ah, Tama! Thank you so much, Tama! You helped me, didn’t you? You’re so clever!” As Rimi picked up Tama, who had jumped into her lap, and rubbed her cheeks against Tama, Shusei gave a concerned smile.

“Since it seems you’ve forgotten, let me just remind you. Of course it’s clever—it’s a divine dragon.”

“What was Master Hakurei trying to do by stealing Tama? Was he trying to gain the power to become emperor himself?”

“I don’t think that’s it. If that was the case, he would have had a better chance if he had made his move before His Majesty’s ascension to the throne. If he’d had the power of the divine dragon at the point of the previous emperor’s death, it’s possible that he would have been chosen as the new emperor instead. It would have been much simpler than trying to upend the circumstances after the fact.”

“But is it possible for a eunuch to ascend to the throne?”

Eunuchs could not have children. As such, some would likely raise their voices in objection to someone who could not continue the bloodline taking the throne, since without a biological child as a successor, it was plain as day that a dispute over the throne would break out.

“Not if he really is a eunuch. However, there are rumors about Hakurei that say that they held back when he was made into a eunuch and that he is still a man.”

It was the rumor that Noble Consort So had mentioned.

“Is that really possible?” Rimi asked.

“It’s not. The person who was responsible for the procedure of making Hakurei a eunuch was my father, Shu Kojin, who has been chancellor since the previous emperor’s reign. He would never take pity on him like that. However... as unlikely as I believe it to be, when I look at Hakurei, something seems different about him compared to other eunuchs.”

“But that’s all the more reason for him to steal Tama *before* the ascension if he wanted to be the emperor, isn’t it? Could it be that he simply detested His Majesty so much that he wanted to ruin his reign?”

“Then this was still a half-baked way of going about it. If that’s what he wanted to do, he should have started a rumor saying that the emperor had lost the divine dragon and was therefore not fit to rule. That would have been much more effective, as it would have caused a commotion in the imperial court. However, no one seems to be aware of the fact that the divine dragon is gone.”

Rimi started thinking as she felt the fluffy Tama against her hand. Something felt strange. Something related to the dark, horrific past in the shadow of the throne.

What could it be... It’s like a thin thread in the darkness...

Within all the various facts, she could sense the one, faint truth. It was like a thread so thin it might not even exist, one that she had to strain her eyes to even detect. However...

“Could it be...” Rimi looked up. The thin thread she’d just noticed might have been the breakthrough that they needed.

“I might be able to make something that will satisfy His Majesty.”

“What do you mean?” Shusei asked.

“Are you going to report the possibility that Master Hakurei stole Tama to the chancellor?”

“If I did, I would have to inform him about you as well. I’m still not sure what to do.”

“In that case, would you mind keeping quiet until I’ve had a chance to get His

Majesty to try the Wakokuan ingredients?” Rimi requested.

“No, I don’t mind at all. Have you managed to solve the problem?”

“Not exactly. But I’d like you to wait. I won’t solve the problem... but I want to expose what is hindering His Majesty from enjoying his meals. If I can do that, I’m sure His Majesty will be satisfied by the food.”

Rimi climbed down from the bed with her eyes fixed on the doorway. Beyond the open door, she could see the outline of the distant mountains, which merged with the dark waters of the spring. The outline was beginning to get faintly brighter. Morning was close.

I just want him to be satisfied.



Rimi stood in the kitchen at dawn. First, she used the wood plane that Shusei had arranged for to shave what looked like wood scraps, the kengyoken, into thin slices. Shusei looked on curiously as Rimi performed what resembled carpentry more than cooking. Rimi took what looked like wood shavings, gave a piece to Shusei, and asked him to taste it. It looked like actual wood shavings, but the curious Shusei put it into his mouth without hesitation. As he did, a fragrant, rich sensation spread in his mouth, which took him off guard.

“This is not just fish, is it?”

“It’s just fish, originally. But if you process it like this, the fishy taste vanishes, and you’re left with something rich yet refreshing.”

“All from these woods scraps...” Shusei spoke in wonderment as he picked up a piece of what looked like solid wood scraps. Hearing this, Rimi gave a happy, soft smile, and started moving around with dancing motions.

What a relief. She seems to be feeling well, Shusei thought as he watched her.

It must have been hard enough just to get used to life in the rear palace of a new country. On top of that, she had been accused of a crime and come close to being beheaded, and last night she had even almost been robbed of her chastity. It must have been the most frightening experience possible for a girl.

Yet she had been standing in the kitchen since early morning. She seemed less

like a girl struggling admirably in the face of everything, and more like someone who had cleared her mind and was trying to enjoy the situation the best she could. So rather than his heart aching at the sight, he felt relieved as he watched her. It was a refreshing sight.

Shusei observed Rimi with great interest. He wondered what she would do with the kengyoken as she put a pot filled with sold water on the stove. Just as the water started to boil, she threw a basketful of shaved kengyoken into the water, before she immediately removed the pot from the stove. She then poured the contents of the pot over a basket that she had placed on top of another pot to strain the liquid.

Rimi showed Shusei the filtered water.

“This is the kengyoken ‘stock’—what you would call ‘tang.’”

“Is that really all it took?” Shusei found it even more shocking than the umifu from the day before.

All she had done was let the kengyoken swim around in the water for a short moment. Was it really possible to make something flavorful that easily? Shusei looked into the pot and found a clear, golden liquid. Rimi poured the liquid into a bowl and handed it to Shusei.

“It smells good,” Shusei said as a rich fragrance wafted from the bowl as he moved it closer to his mouth. He took a sip.

It had a profound richness to it, but one different from the umifu. The sharp aftertaste was reminiscent of the umifu, however. Wakokuan tangs seemed to have superb aftertastes in general.

“This is excellent. However, Rimi, His Majesty will not be able to taste this,” Shusei said in a somewhat apologetic tone.

Shusei had known Shohi since they were both young. And as someone who took pride in the care he gave when it came to Shohi’s food, he felt somehow responsible for the emperor’s inability to taste what Rimi had made.

“That’s not surprising. If you cook with that poor-tasting water, you would have to make the food taste very strong, like adding a lot of spices to hide the taste of the water,” Rimi replied calmly.

“How are you going to prove that this tastes good, then? If you make something with a strong taste, the original taste of the tang will disappear. You won’t be able to prove that it tastes good thanks to the tang.”

“His Majesty is from Konkoku, so I believe the key lies in Konkokuan food. I’d like to try starting with Konkokuan food—in this case, tang, which is reminiscent of Wakokuan ‘stock.’ Master Shusei, how is the most common type of Konkokuan tang made?”

“The most common and beloved type of tang is jitang, made by simmering bone-in chicken, spring onion, and ginger together,” Shusei explained.

“I’d like you to make that tang.”

“What will you make with that?”

“There’s a few things I’d like to try.” Rimi’s eyes were bright with excitement.

“That look again... Your eyes also remind me of myself somehow. Our circumstances are similar to each other in a way, Rimi.”

“Our circumstances?”

“Yes. You mentioned that you found the place you belonged by making food for that Saigu of yours. I’m not much different myself. My pursuit of knowledge and my intellect are what guarantee my place in the Shu house.”

Shusei surprised himself as he spoke with a downcast expression. He had never talked about himself like this with anyone before, yet he had told Rimi without even thinking. It must have been because the foreign princess in front of him felt like something akin to a friend with similar worries as himself. He felt some kind of affinity to her as a scholar.

Taken by a sudden feeling of embarrassment, Shusei cleared his throat, said that he would go and fetch the ingredients needed, and left the kitchen.

Such a strange sensation... Whenever Rimi had observed him with her beautiful eyes, he would feel awfully nervous. Without her having said or done anything, he felt a strange, restless sensation in his chest. But it was not an unpleasant sensation.

If Rimi is unable to make something that suits His Majesty’s tastes, what will

happen to her? He thought as he strolled down the cloisters. *It's His Majesty we're talking about—he might start saying to have her head chopped off again. Is there nothing I can do to at least ensure that she makes it out alive? But even if she survives, she won't be able to stay in the rear palace. I suppose she would be exiled back to Wakoku.*

However, it was difficult to imagine that Wakoku would welcome her back with open arms. To return a tribute was an act of disrespect toward a country. Wakoku would do everything it could to ensure that she remained in Konkoku. If that happened, she would have nowhere left to go.

Should I take her in?

That didn't seem like a bad idea, Shusei thought.

III

Shohi would not be able to appreciate the taste of the Wakokuan stock alone.

And if I make him a Wakokuan dish, it's unlikely that he'll be satisfied with a taste he's not used to. That said, if I use the stock with Konkokuan food, it will overpower the stock and make it impossible to taste.

In front of Rimi was a simmering pot that contained a thick, cloudy liquid. In it was chicken as well as spring onion and ginger, which were in the middle of turning into a superb tang after having simmered in the pot for several hours already. A whole day had passed since Shusei had fetched the ingredients and they had started simmering them. It was two days after Shohi's unexpected visit.

"I'll just have to figure something out."

She poured some of the simmering jitang onto a small plate and tasted it, swallowing with a gulp. The jitang had a rich, mellow flavor. The flavor remained in her mouth after she swallowed it, and she felt the jitang landing heavily in her stomach. It was a taste befitting the continent, one that gave you the strength needed to traverse these vast lands. Rimi found it rather delicious. People who did physical labor would have found this taste especially superb.

Meanwhile, on the counter behind her were two pots that contained two

different types of clear, golden stock—umifu and kengyoken. They were both made similarly by extracting the essence of the ingredients, yet they tasted remarkably different.

“How is it coming along?” Shusei, who was standing next to her, asked. Rimi gave him a warm smile and handed him the small plate she was holding. Shusei brought it to his mouth.

“How is it?” Rimi asked as she observed Shusei’s mouth.

“It tastes great. It’s the same jitang that I know and love.”

“You also said that you liked the Wakokuan stock, didn’t you? You’re sensitive to flavors, so you’re able to enjoy Wakokuan foods too. But His Majesty said that it didn’t taste like anything. That he couldn’t tell what it tasted like.”

The best way to show that something had a particular taste, and that it tasted good, was to simply have someone try it like this. However, Shohi had been unable to tell it had taste to begin with. The Wakokuan taste had been too delicate for someone used to Konkokuan food to even perceive it.

“Just because the taste is so subtle that it can’t be perceived doesn’t mean that it might as well not be there, correct?” Rimi spoke to confirm whether her line of thinking was correct.

“That’s true. Some tastes are needed even if you can’t detect them,” Shusei agreed.

“And that’s what you call an, uh... It’s hidden...a taste you can’t tell...” Rimi stumbled over her words.

“Do you mean a secret ingredient?” Shusei guessed.

“Yes, that. The subtle flavor is what makes the food taste good. The fact that you can’t clearly make out the taste gives the food more depth,” Rimi explained.

“But the problem is how to prove that that subtle flavor actually tastes good,” Shusei countered.

“Normally, in order to make a taste more prominent, you would make the taste as pure as possible, correct?”

“That method worked on me. However, it was nothing but water to His Majesty’s tongue.”

“But if you want someone to enjoy a taste, you need to make it prominent...even purer...more obvious...”

Deep in thought, Rimi took another sip of the umifu and kengyoken stocks using the small plate. They really did taste great, she thought, her gaze fixed on the plate in her hand. She was reminded of how her Saigu sister had also made a fuss about her stock in the past. She’d had an astonishing carefreeness when complaining. As Rimi thought back, a small giggle escaped her lips.

“What is it?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just remembered something funny.”

Feeling slightly tired, Rimi sat down on a small chair nearby. Repeatedly she had tried to figure out how to make someone from Konkoku perceive the taste of the Wakokuan stock, but she had yet to come up with a solution. Her train of thought had reached a frustrating dead-end that she was unable to overcome. Going back and forth in her head was wearing her down.

She thought about her dear Saigu sister to clear her head as she stared distantly into the air.

“My Lady Saigu was always very particular about her stock. When I was young she would drown me in complaints. She would say that I had ‘astoundingly poor taste’ or that the food was ‘shockingly unrefined,’ and so on. She has a short temper you see, Lady Saigu.”

“I’m amazed you can smile like that. It must have been hard to serve such a short-tempered person,” Shusei said with an astounded look on his face as he made his way to the shelves where the teaware was stored.

“No, not at all. Though everyone else would always say how unfortunate I was.”

“Yes, obviously.”

“It wasn’t obvious at all. Even though everyone thought it was obvious, it actually wasn’t as obvious as it seemed. Everyone would think that I was

unfortunate for being the Umashi-no-Miya. They said it was unfortunate for a princess to have to serve as the temperamental Lady Saigu's cook. But I wasn't unfortunate at all. Being the Umashi-no-Miya gave me a place where I belonged."

Her Saigu sister would have always thrown a tantrum and scream as she voiced her complaints. But whenever Rimi had made something that truly tasted great, her sister would have given her a truly divine, kind smile, befitting an emissary of a god, as she had looked satisfied from the bottom of her heart. That loving smile had not been false. And even when she had thrown tantrums and complained, Lady Saigu would never have unfairly hurt Rimi. She had always referred to her by her "Umashi-no-Miya" title, proof that she did respect her in one way or another.

"Lady Saigu had a short temper, but she cherished me, and I loved Lady Saigu in return. So the obviously unfortunate fate of the Umashi-no-Miya was not obvious in the least."

"Is that how it is?" Shusei said as he skillfully poured tea into a cup and gently placed it in front of Rimi, whose eyes widened in surprise.

"Why are you serving tea, Master Shusei?"

"You seemed a bit tired, so I thought you could use some."

"But a man serving tea?"

"Is that so strange? Here in Konkoku, it's an obvious custom. Ever since ancient times, making tea has been a male activity. It's only in the past few decades that women started taking part. Is it different in Wakoku?"

"In Wakoku it's women who serve tea, and men just drink it."

As Rimi relaxed her body a bit, the small plate she was holding accidentally fell out of her hand. She let out a quick "Ah!" as it fell by her feet on the stone floor and split cleanly in two. The shrill sound of the plate breaking reverberated in the kitchen, and as Rimi felt the sound shooting through her feet and up to her head, she had a sudden realization.

Obvious...! Her realization took the form of a single word.

What she had tasted on the plate was Wakokuan cooking. She had spent all her time thinking about how to make that taste prominent enough for Konkokuans to recognize it. To make a taste prominent, you—obviously—had to make it stand out. And so, she had sought to have the stock consumed in its purest form. However, that would not work with Shohi, which had led her to a dead-end.

But what had Rimi just talked about? She had said that the obviously unfortunate Umashi-no-Miya had not been unfortunate at all. In Konkoku it was obvious for a man to serve tea, but it was not obvious in Wakoku.

“Oh, is that it...?”

What you thought was obvious was actually not obvious at all.

“What’s the matter, Rimi?” Shusei asked, but Rimi simply stood dumbfounded, unable to form any words.

When she finally started to speak, her voice was faintly trembling.

“Master Shusei, I...I thought that to make someone appreciate a specific taste, it should be as pure, as distinct, as possible.”

“Indeed, that much is obvious.”

But Rimi shook her head.

“No, it’s not obvious. I just fooled myself into thinking that and was unable to look at it another way—the opposite way. But to make someone appreciate a specific taste, it doesn’t have to be pure.”

A silent flame burned in Rimi’s eyes as Shusei stared at her in wonder. Rimi then thought back to Hakurei and Shohi. They were just the same. She thought about the thin thread between them that she had sensed when pondering their actions. It was a thread that could not be seen unless you discarded what you thought was obvious.

Nothing is obvious. She was convinced.

Shusei gazed at Rimi as if overwhelmed by her.

“Master Shusei, I have a request. We have five more days until the time His Majesty gave us is up, correct? Would it be possible to have His Majesty come

back here to the Palace of the Water Spirit on that final day? I want to prove to him right here that the tribute from Wakoku tastes good. I have a plan.”

Upon hearing Rimi’s plan, Shusei jumped up and exclaimed, “What a ludicrous idea!”

But Rimi insisted that it was essential.

“What seems obvious isn’t obvious at all,” she persuaded the reluctant Shusei. Finally, she convinced Shusei to write two letters addressed to the imperial palace. They were both invitations to come to the Palace of the Water Spirit in five days. One was addressed to the emperor of Konkoku, Ryu Shohi. The other...

Shusei was against the idea, and Rimi herself could not be sure that everything would go according to plan. She knew that it was a risky bet. However, without doing this, Shohi would likely never be satisfied with the food. Rimi had sensed a thin thread originating from the horrific past in the shadow of the throne. She had made that thread into her lifeline, and now had no choice but to face it.

A single word. That was all she needed. If she could hear that word, it would not only save her own life but also give her a place where she belonged in this foreign land.



“This isn’t a very good idea,” Shusei said as he sighed at the sight of the oddly placed table and chairs. It was the day of Shohi’s visit to the Palace of the Water Spirit.

“Yes, I agree!” Rimi, who was standing next to Shusei, enthusiastically concurred as Shusei threw her a cold glance.

“This was your idea, you know, Rimi. Or did I get that wrong somehow?”

“Correct, this was my idea.” Rimi’s gentle smile made all venom disappear from Shusei’s body.

“Are you really that confident?”

“I have about as much as a cat’s forehead.”

“That’s a saying used for very small spaces, but if I do my best to figure out what you’re trying to say, it sounds like you barely have any confidence at all.”

“That’s right, I have almost no confidence.”

“Oh, so I was more or less on the money... Wait, hold on!” In utter shock, Shusei grabbed both of Rimi’s shoulders. “You have no confidence?!”

“Yes I do, about a cat’s forehead worth of confidence.”

“You can spare me your strange figures of speech during a situation like this! Just say it as it is! If you don’t have any confidence, why did you propose something like this?!” Shusei gaped at Rimi.

“I’m sorry, but this is the only method I could think of to make His Majesty satisfied,” Rimi said with a shrug.

“You don’t need to satisfy him! You just need to prove that the Wakokuan ingredients can be used for adding flavor to food!”

“But if we want him to recognize it as a flavor, we really do need him to actually find that it tastes good, don’t we?”

“It’s enough if he can tell that the taste changes and that it doesn’t taste bad.”

“No, I promised to make His Majesty something that tastes good. Given that emperor... I think if we don’t make him admit to being satisfied with the food, he’ll still want me dead.”

Shohi had indeed commanded her to make him something that tasted good. Even if it had just been a figure of speech, if Shohi was in a particularly bad mood, he would probably use that command as a justification for having Rimi executed. Shusei had even been wondering himself if he would be able to mediate between the two if such an event occurred. He had no choice but to admit that her justification rang true. Though she seemed absentminded much of the time, Rimi was well-attuned to the minds of others. Shusei made up his mind and nodded.

“Very well. If it were to come to that, I shall plead for your life with everything I have. So if that happens, please just stay quiet, lest you anger His Majesty

further with your questionable Konkokuan.”

“Understood!” Rimi replied with an innocent smile as she heard a squeaking voice by her feet. The Quinary Dragon—the creature Rimi called Tama—ran up her skirt and jumped up on her shoulder.

This pet that Rimi called Tama so affectionately belonged to the most spiritually powerful group of divine beasts in Konkoku: divine dragons. And as a five-clawed divine dragon, it was actually one rank above other divine dragons.

And she calls it Tama... I'm amazed she hasn't received punishment from above yet. And she even keeps it as a pet... The Quinary Dragon itself, and its pet-like demeanor, is another source of Shusei's headache.

“Rimi, are you sure about this? Are you really going to go ahead with your plan?”

“Yes. If I don't, then not only will His Majesty not be able to taste the Wakokuan ingredients, he'll refuse to even enter the room and will leave the palace.”

“Yes, I'm sure he would. That's what I would have done if I was His Majesty. This set-up just looks far too suspicious. Not to mention the other guest...”

The rustling of clothes could be heard from the cloister outside. The Quinary Dragon quickly hid under Rimi's skirt as a beautiful eunuch made his appearance in the doorway.

“Thank you for the invitation, Setsu Rimi. What in the world possessed you to invite me?” Hakurei smiled.

The two people to which Shusei had sent the invitations to visit the Palace of the Water Spirit today were the emperor Shohi and one more person—Hakurei here. Shusei sensed Rimi tensing up, and he stepped out in front of her. Considering what she had been through, it was no surprise that she was afraid of Hakurei. But despite what had happened, she had still asked Shusei to invite him. It was necessary, she had said.

“Your seat is over here, Hakurei,” Shusei said stiffly while he smiled faintly.

Hakurei sat down in the chair and spoke in a sweet voice. “I didn't expect to

receive an invitation from you, Rimi.”

“If you really were the kind of person who would want to do something like that, I would never want to see you again. However, your true objective wasn’t me, so... I can endure it.”

“‘Endure,’ eh? But I have to say, what’s the meaning of this set-up?” Hakurei looked around the room with a smile, but he was clearly wary.

The set-up was indeed strange. They had removed the doors that separated two rooms to turn it into one single room. The floor was level between the two rooms, however as the rooms were not made to function as one, the color of the floor tiles differed between them. One room had a black floor and one a white. A table was placed to straddle the line where the color changed, which was where the doors had once been. On each end of the table was a chair—two chairs in total. One chair was placed on the black floor, and the other on the white floor, facing each other. Hakurei was sitting on the chair on the white floor. The differing color of the floors made the set-up seem slightly sloppy.

“This set-up is to ensure that you can enjoy a satisfactory meal, Master Hakurei.”

Just as Rimi had answered, a guardsman rang the bell out front.

His Majesty is here. Shusei exchanged a glance with Rimi, who nodded with a nervous look on her face and left the room. Shusei watched the tense Rimi walk down the cloister with quick steps, immensely worried. *I just hope this turns out well.*

If Rimi was wrong about her conjecture and her scheme failed, Shusei would also be held responsible. Still, he went along with her plan. The reason was that when Rimi explained the thin thread she had sensed, Shusei too felt as though it might exist, and pulling it seemed like something necessary for Shohi. Rimi had said that “What seems obvious isn’t obvious at all.” Hearing that, Shusei had given in and now found himself betting on a plan that Rimi herself boasted her lack of confidence in.

If Father were to learn of this, he would scold me for an eternity. His father, Chancellor Shu, would likely say that Shusei was only wasting his time. Had it been Chancellor Shu, he would have immediately called for a court priest, had

the Quinary Dragon captured, and then would have quickly seen to Setsu Rimi's beheading. He would have convicted Hakurei and had him executed as well. It would all have been over in half a day.

But is that really what's best for His Majesty?

Shutting out your own feelings and handling everything indifferently was the mark of a skilled official and chancellor. However, as you went about handling everything indifferently, small cracks would form. Those cracks needed to be patched eventually, lest they grew bigger and eventually destroyed something. It was not just a rebellion against his father; as he listened to what Rimi had to say, Shusei felt as though there must be a better way to go about matters than his chancellor father.



"Thank you for gracing us with your presence, Your Majesty," Rimi greeted Shohi as she kowtowed before him.

Shohi had been accompanied by aides and guardsmen, but when Rimi came to meet him he ordered them to wait in another building. The only servant that remained was Shin Jotetsu. After he observed the others walk off, Shohi spoke to the kneeling Rimi in an amused tone.

"In Shusei's letter, he claimed that you would be proving that the tributes from Wakoku were very high-grade ingredients even to a Konkokuan. Are you sure about this? If you cannot satisfy me, your head will be leaving your body today." The most frightening part of his utterance was that, despite his nonchalant tone, part of him was clearly serious.

"I am well aware. Please, follow me," Rimi responded, holding back her voice from shivering as she nodded meekly and stood up.

"Setsu Rimi, are you shaking?" Jotetsu asked in a mocking tone, but Rimi was unable to turn around and simply nodded.

"Yes. Well, a little."

As she listened to the footsteps of Shohi and Jotetsu behind her, she started to shiver from a combination of nervousness, fear, as well as a pinch of excitement. It reminded her of the nervousness and excitement she had always

felt before a ritual back in her home country.

This is where it really begins... Believing in herself, she pulled the thin thread she had sensed. That was the only thing Rimi could do.

“Please have a seat.”

Rimi led him into the room, but Shohi stopped at the doorway. His mood immediately turned foul.

“What is this? Explain yourselves. Why is Hakurei here?”

Jotetsu’s eyes gleamed with a menacing light and narrowed at the sight of Hakurei.

“Oh? Hakurei’s here, is he?”

Hakurei’s face tensed up at the sight of Shohi, but it quickly changed back into his usual smile.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Your Majesty. What a surprise. I was not expecting to see you here.”

Shohi turned to Rimi, who was standing next to him.

“What exactly are you planning?”

“I am planning to have Your Majesty sit in that chair and enjoy a meal made using Wakokuan ingredients.”

“Hakurei is here as well. Eunuchs are not allowed to accompany the emperor at the dining table.” Shohi’s quiet rage burned fiercer by the moment. Rimi held back her fear and shook her head.

“He is not accompanying you.”

“But he is sitting by the table, right there!”

“No, Your Majesty, look carefully. Master Hakurei is sitting in a different room.”

Still pointing at Hakurei, Shohi’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“You cannot seriously be...” Shohi started yelling but stopped himself upon noticing something. Hakurei too glanced at his surroundings and let out a quiet

“Oh.” Jotetsu started chuckling as if he had just witnessed something ridiculous.

“I gotta say, I’m amazed. How did you manage to come up with this, Setsu Rimi?”

The table spanned two rooms. One seat was on a black floor, the other on a white floor. Even though the chairs faced each other, they were still in different rooms.

“You cannot be serious! Do you really think I would fall for such sophistry?! Why must I eat together with a eunuch?!”

“Please sit down, Your Majesty. Right on that chair on the black floor,” Shusei tried to pacify Shohi, but Shohi reached for the sword that hung from his hip.

“Are you trying to make a mockery of me, you lowly palace woman?!”

Rimi could feel a cold sweat run down her back.

He’s reaching for his sword. He’s serious.

The moment she realized what was about to happen, she used the card that she had been hiding. This was Rimi’s trump card. She called out in a trembling voice.

“Tama!”

Chapter 7: How to be Satisfied with Your Food

I

In response to Rimi's call, a silver divine beast swiftly jumped out from under Rimi's skirt. The divine beast ran up Rimi's skirt and onto her shoulders, where she lovingly coiled Rimi's hair around itself. Hakurei almost stood up from his chair, and Shohi widened his eyes in disbelief.

"The Quinary Dragon!"

"What's going on here, Shusei?" Jotetsu asked, dumbfounded, but Shusei urged him to fall silent with his gaze.

Shohi, who had been stunned for a moment, quickly regained his senses and glared at Rimi, Shusei, and Hakurei.

"What is the meaning of this? What is my...my Quinary Dragon doing in a place like this?"

"Your Majesty, Rimi found the Quinary Dragon by chance in the rear palace. She kept it as a pet without even knowing what it was."

"She kept it without informing me?! In any case, hand the Quinary Dragon over this instant!"

Shohi grabbed hold of Rimi and pushed her violently against the wall. As Rimi let out a scream, Tama quickly jumped down from her shoulders. Shohi turned around to follow the divine beast with his eyes, and Jotetsu prepared to give chase. Tama skipped outside the room on light feet, jumped up on the railing by the outside cloister, and gazed up at the sky. She seemed as though she would take off to the sky at any moment.

"The Quinary Dragon!"

Shohi threw Rimi aside once again and ran out to the cloister along with Jotetsu. Seemingly sensing the two of them getting closer, Tama stretched its body toward the sky.

“The Quinary Dragon!” Jotetsu yelled as Shohi screamed.

“Why, Quinary Dragon?! Do not leave me! I am the emperor!”

Tama did not react to Shohi’s voice as it stood up on its tip-toes and further stretched its neck upwards. But just as everyone felt as though it would take off...

“Tama, wait! Your Majesty, Master Jotetsu, please stop!” Rimi shouted as she held her head. She had hit the wall when Shohi had pushed her aside and was now dizzy.

As Shohi and Jotetsu stopped in their tracks, Tama relaxed her body and looked toward Rimi with an inquisitive look. Shohi followed the divine beast’s gaze, astonished.

“It listens to Rimi...?”

“Preposterous,” Jotetsu muttered.

While holding her head, which was throbbing in pain, Rimi stood up from leaning against the wall.

“Your Majesty, if you try to catch her against her will, Tama—the Quinary Dragon—will probably run away.”

“What is happening? Why? How did it turn out like this?” Shohi gave a frustrated frown.

“Your Majesty, Tama listens to what I say. It’s probably because I gave her food that she became attached to me. So please, sit down and have your meal,” Rimi pleaded.

“Do you truly think I can do that?! The Quinary Dragon is right there, preparing to take off to the sky at any moment!” Shohi yelled.

“Tama, come here,” Rimi said in a kind voice and held out her hand. Tama jumped down from the railing, speedily made her way to Rimi’s feet, and swiftly climbed up onto her shoulders.

Shohi was lost for words at the sight and simply stood still, flabbergasted. Jotetsu gave a resigned look, sighed, and leaned against a pillar. Hakurei had seemed surprised at first but now sat calmly in his seat. He was observing Rimi

with an emotionless expression.

“Tama will be right here with me, but if Your Majesty attempts something, Tama may leave for the sky. She will stay here if I ask her to, so that is what I will do for now. So please, Your Majesty, take a seat.”

“It is as she says, Your Majesty. Please just take a seat for now,” Shusei supported Rimi, urging Shohi on.

“Were you aware of this, Shusei? Did you invite me here, knowing what would happen?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Are you aware of what you are doing, Shusei? You two are threatening me. You are forcing me to sit down, taking the Quinary Dragon as a hostage.”

“That may be the case.”

“You will pay for this, Shusei. You too, Setsu Rimi,” Shohi exclaimed as he sat down on the chair atop the black floor.

Thank goodness. His Majesty complied much easier than I thought.

Shusei had described Shohi as stubborn and indifferent, and Rimi herself shuddered at the thought of his cruel manner of speaking and acting. However, toward the Quinary Dragon—perhaps toward gods in general—he was obedient. He was not so arrogant as to be unafraid of the gods.

Something must be broken inside His Majesty. That’s all.

As cruel as he acted, he never seemed to have fun or be happy. *That must be the same reason why he would never be satisfied with his food,* Rimi thought. Something inside him must have been just a little bit warped. And the same was true of Hakurei.

It’s time.

Rimi closed her eyes and told herself to calm down. Jotetsu’s presence scared her. Everything about him seemed to say that he would mercilessly cut down everyone in the room with his large sword if something happened to Shohi.

Careful not to act discourteously. But I also can’t be too stiff. Isn’t that right,

Lady Saigu?

Rimi remembered how she had always been scolded by her Saigu sister during the ritual to offer food to the god.

“You must be prepared to fight to force the god to admit satisfaction, my Umashi-no-Miya.”

Her Saigu sister’s stinging words resurfaced in her mind, and she responded quietly as she opened her eyes, *Yes, Lady Saigu. I will.*

Rimi faced the palace attendant Sai Hakurei and the Konkokuan emperor Ryu Shohi, put one hand on top of the other, and gave a beautiful bow.

“I will begin now.”





Something about her is different. Shusei was astonished by how Rimi's demeanor had changed. She would usually seem gentle and warm like cotton, but now she was different. *Is this an immortal—no, a shrine maiden?*

Her duty as an Umashi-no-Miya in Wakoku had consisted of making food for a god. Rimi herself had probably not realized, but that in and of itself was nothing short of a sacred vocation. She had this special air about her that she was only granted through years of serving a holy vocation. An immortal who serves the holy communion of Wakoku, Shusei had jokingly referred to her as several times. Now, however, he stood speechless. He felt as though he was watching a true immortal.

She's a normal human being, not an immortal. But she is, without a doubt, someone who serves holy communion.



Hakurei narrowed his eyes at the sound of Rimi's dignified voice, while Shohi continued to glare at her with an expression of rage.

"Before the meal, we need to perform an important ritual." Rimi looked up at Hakurei. "I have a question for Master Sai Hakurei. Please answer. Master Hakurei, are you the one who stole this Quinary Dragon from His Majesty's room?"

Upon hearing this, Shohi, startled, turned his gaze from Rimi to Hakurei. Jotetsu's eyes grew cold. He looked like a hunting dog eyeing up its prey. Hakurei's usual vague smile, however, was unperturbed.

"Why do you think that, Rimi?"

"I found the Quinary Dragon in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings. The same kitchen that you, Master Hakurei, for some reason appeared. Why were you there? When you learned that I frequented that kitchen, you researched me, approached me, and helped me. That's because you heard that I was keeping a silver mouse that I found in the kitchen, isn't it? You knew that she was the Quinary Dragon. After all, you're the one who stole her from His Majesty. Isn't that right?"

“Yes, that’s quite right,” Hakurei said with a radiant smile as Shohi frowned.

“So... It was you, after all...” Shohi grumbled in a deep voice as he forcefully gripped the end of the table and gritted his teeth.

Jotetsu walked up next to Shohi and coldly asked him, “Shall I kill him right here and now?” However, Shohi seemed to not even notice him.

“Explain yourself, Hakurei.”

“Please sit down, Your Majesty,” Rimi sternly warned Shohi as he tried to stand up.

“Are you mad?! Do you think I will take orders from a mere palace woman like you?!”

“I told you that this is a ceremony!”

Shohi’s eyes widened at hearing Rimi speak so forcefully. He had likely never been commanded so sternly by anyone in his entire life before. As Shohi remained in shocked silence, Rimi turned back to Hakurei.

“Master Hakurei, why did you steal the Quinary Dragon?”

“Why do you ask, Rimi? You know the answer already, don’t you?”

“I want to hear it from you directly, Master Hakurei.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s fine with me. I was prepared for this ever since I received that letter from Shusei. If he had learned that you possessed the Quinary Dragon, then he also knew why I had taken an interest in you. Not to mention, Chancellor Shu already suspected me. I had no chance of fooling anyone. There is more than enough circumstantial evidence. I will probably not leave this palace alive. Isn’t that right, Your Majesty?” Hakurei asked Shohi in a teasing tone.

“Do not ask what you already know,” Shohi replied in a deep voice.

Hakurei shrugged his shoulders before he wearily rested his chin in his hand. The sight of him was exceedingly beautiful.

“I loathe Noble Consort En for driving my mother to her death and robbing my life from me. Even now that she’s dead, I possess too much rage and hatred

to know what to do with. Of course, I could never like Shohi, the son of that woman. I was imprisoned in the rear palace with no respect for my own will. I envy Shohi for nonchalantly walking the path that could have been mine. I detest him for it. Nothing can make those feelings go away.”

Hakurei gave a captivating smile before continuing.

“I have become someone who, no matter how much I fight, could never become the emperor. Even if I were to assassinate Shohi to provide an outlet for my own emotions, all that would occur is a dispute over the throne. I don’t want to plunge the country into conflict. But if I simply did nothing, I would have been left feeling unfulfilled. That’s why I stole the Quinary Dragon.”

“I already had a feeling that you were the one who stole it, Hakurei. Both me and Chancellor Shu. You’re the only one in His Majesty’s vicinity who was acting suspiciously,” Jotetsu spoke. “But I’ve got a question. Chancellor Shu asked it too. Just what were you trying to achieve by stealing the Quinary Dragon?”

“You can’t tell, Jotetsu?” Hakurei smirked.

“Can’t say I do,” Jotetsu admitted begrudgingly.

Hakurei laughed.

“Despite how I detested and envied him, I couldn’t kill Shohi. So I thought that I’d at least see how he measured up. The emperor is only an emperor because he was chosen by the Quinary Dragon, right? So why not let it roam free rather than lock it in a cage? If it did not leave Shohi’s side, he would have been fit to be emperor. And in that case, I would have repressed all my feelings of detestation and envy and served my emperor brother.”

Shohi frowned. He seemed confused at what Hakurei had said.

Hakurei continued.

“If the Quinary Dragon had left for beyond the skies, then he would not be fit to be emperor. Without the protection of the Quinary Dragon, this country would one day perish. Shohi would then go down in history as the emperor who ruined the empire. But for the people, that would have been for the best. Instead of suffering under the oppression of an incapable emperor, it’s better to found a new country. Even if conflict were to break out, it would still serve the

people much better.”

Hakurei’s gaze wandered toward the cloister as he seemed to envision that possible future. He looked at the rippling surface of the beautiful green spring beyond the railing.

“That’s why I stole the Quinary Dragon and released it toward the sky in the middle of the palace.”

“But then why did the Quinary Dragon end up in the rear palace?” Shusei asked with a perplexed expression, at which Hakurei gave a dejected smile.

“Because after I released the Quinary Dragon, it flew straight to the rear palace. Flying away would have been one thing, but I never expected it to flee to the rear place instead. I couldn’t simply leave it be, so I frantically searched for it, but it was nowhere to be found. Then I heard the servants gossip about having seen a strange, silver creature in the kitchen of the Palace of Small Wings.”

Shusei seemed somehow unconvinced by Hakurei’s confession. Shohi too seemed more confused than enraged. Jotetsu similarly observed Hakurei as though he was witnessing something incomprehensible.

Rimi was convinced. The thin thread she had sensed really did exist.

He hasn’t noticed. Rimi smiled.

“But why, Master Hakurei? It’s very strange.”

“What’s so strange, Rimi?”

“You could have come up with any number of ways to thoroughly crush His Majesty. Strangely, you went out of your way to test His Majesty instead.”

Hakurei’s usual beautiful smile vanished. He then frowned instead as though he was in pain and seemed to be struggling to find an answer to Rimi’s question. However, Rimi had no intention of listening to Hakurei’s answer. If anything, she needed to prevent him from giving a makeshift answer. What she wanted was the truth—and she wanted Hakurei to admit that truth to himself, not her.

Rimi turned to Shohi.

“Your Majesty, I’ve been told that when Master Hakurei was to become your personal attendant, you said that you didn’t mind. Is that true?”

“That is... What about it?”

Shohi was on his guard—he even seemed frightened, as if Rimi would drag something unknown out of him.

“Why did you say that you didn’t mind?”

“I said that I did not mind because I did not. There was nothing more to it. Shu Kojin suggested having him exiled, but he was not worth the trouble. So it did not matter to me. I did not mind.”

“You didn’t mind.” Rimi smiled.

See? I knew it. She felt the answer make its way up her throat but held her tongue. Here, too, was a thin thread.

“That concludes the ceremony. I will now prepare the meal.”

“What?!” Shohi yelled at Rimi’s abrupt declaration. “Hakurei confessed to stealing the Quinary Dragon! You cannot be telling me to not only not apprehend him, but to also have a meal with him?!”

“You will share a meal.”

Rimi suggestively patted Tama on her shoulder, causing Shohi to bite his tongue and fall silent. This was the most effective way of ensuring that Shohi stayed calm. A disheartened Hakurei tilted his head in confusion.

“Do you seriously want us to eat now, Rimi?”

“Indeed. You will have a meal here.”

“You’re an awful girl,” Hakurei said as his eyes narrowed.

Rimi looked into Hakurei’s suspicious eyes and nodded.

“Indeed. Please bear with me, Master Hakurei. If you’re already prepared for whatever might happen, then there’s no need to hurry.”

Three enormous pots were brought into the room, each decorated with patterns of flowers and birds. Two of the pots were filled with clear, golden liquid, and a cloudy liquid went into the third pot. The three pots were placed on a separate stand from the dining table, and hot steam was rising from them.

One pot contained stock made from one of the tributes from Wakoku, umifu. The second contained the kengyoken stock. The third contained the traditional Konkokuwan jitang.

“These two are tang made from the Wakokuwan tributes. Please have a taste.”

Rimi poured the umifu and kengyoken stock into separate bowls featuring grass designs, filling roughly half of the bowls, before placing them in front of Shohi and Hakurei. They both seemed reluctant, but at the same time unwilling to look at each other, so instead they fixed their gazes on the bowls in front of them as they picked up their spoons. It should go without saying as they were practically being forced, but they scooped the stock out of the bowls and into their mouths almost as if they were fulfilling a duty. One spoonful after another, they swallowed the stock before putting their spoons down.

“What is the meaning of this? This is nothing but hot water. How many times do you mean to have me drink hot water? What are you trying to do?” Shohi mumbled. Hakurei similarly let out a small sigh.

“What do you want from me? I’ve told you everything I had to tell you. Isn’t it time to settle this?” Hakurei said.

“How does it taste, Master Hakurei?” Rimi asked.

“The taste? You can’t really expect me to tell you something like that in this situation. They’re both just hot water. Slightly flavored hot water.”

“Then how about this?”

Rimi walked up to Hakurei, picked up one bowl, poured its contents into the other, and mixed it. She then walked up to Shohi and did the same. Hakurei and Shohi observed Rimi with great suspicion in their eyes, but Rimi simply presented the bowls to the two with a gentle smile.

“Please, have a taste.”

Once again, the two of them put one spoonful after the other of the stock into their mouths before looking up.

“Nothing has changed,” Shohi said.

“The taste has improved a bit, but otherwise it’s the same,” Hakurei said while observing his bowl.

Having grown impatient, Shohi suddenly slammed the table.

“Enough! I have had enough of you stalling for time! In the end, all the tributes from Wakoku are good for is making hot water!”

“That’s right. The tang you get by combining these two stocks is the finest taste you can produce from the Wakokuan tributes.”

“You just admitted that this hot water was the taste of the Wakokuan tributes! Then I shall have your head this instant!”

“Your Majesty, if you cut off Rimi’s head here, the Quinary Dragon is sure to fly away,” Shusei warned the angered Shohi. Hearing this, Shohi once again clenched his fists and closed his mouth as if controlled by reins.

“Is this our meal, Rimi? Are you aware that this may be the last thing I taste in my life?” Hakurei spoke despondently.

“No, what I am about to serve you is the meal I would like you to eat,” Rimi responded as she walked up to the last of the three pots that contained the cloudy jitang.

Steam rose up from the surface of the cloudy liquid, and a strong smell of chicken, ginger, and spring onion filled the air. Rimi took a pinch of salt from a pot she had under her arm as she tasted it with a small spoon.

A strong taste. It’s one Konkokuans are used to.

She nodded as she confirmed the taste before pouring the liquid into two bowls. She put the bowls on a tray, and then placed them in front of Shohi and Hakurei.

“This is jitang.”

At the sight and smell of the familiar tang, Hakurei and Shohi simultaneously

turned their puzzled gazes to Rimi, but before they had a chance to ask what she was trying to do, Rimi forcefully encouraged them to continue their meal with a smile.

“Please, have a taste. It’s the usual jitang that you both are used to.”

With incredulous looks on their faces, after filling their spoons, they both moved them toward their mouths. As they put the jitang in their mouths, they both looked puzzled.

“It...really is just a normal jitang,” Hakurei noted.

“Just what is fun about feeding us something like this?” Shohi asked irritably.

Hearing their responses, Rimi asked, “Does it taste good?”

Hakurei suddenly smiled. “It’s the usual taste.”

Shohi replied with irritation in his voice. “It is edible, nothing more.”

Rimi smiled in response. That was just the answer she had hoped for. She turned her back to Shohi and Hakurei, who had been taken by surprise at her smile, and walked back to the still steaming pots. She then scooped up tang from each of the pots and poured it into one bowl.

“Now, please compare that with this.”

She put one bowl containing the tang mixture in front of Hakurei and another in front of Shohi. Rimi took a breath.

“This is the actual, main meal of today. It’s a special bowl. I made it using both Konkokuan tang and Wakokuan stock. I call it xiantang.”

She took a graceful bow.

“This is special. Please enjoy it. I will be satisfied as long as you have a taste of this. I will also persuade the Quinary Dragon to return to His Majesty’s side. So please, enjoy.”

“Are you really planning on returning the Quinary Dragon?”

“I am. However, all I can do is try to persuade her. The final decision is up to the Quinary Dragon herself.”

From atop Rimi’s shoulder, Tama made eye contact with Shohi for the first

time. Its piercing blue eyes gazed at him as if to command him to believe Rimi. Shohi looked disgruntled but nodded.

“Very well. I simply need to eat this, yes?”

“Yes. Now, any further service from me is unnecessary. I will take my leave and return later.”

“Huh?”

“What did you say?”

Hakurei and Shohi both uttered expressions of confusion, but Rimi paid them no heed as she turned her back and started walking. Shusei told Jotetsu to come with them before he followed Rimi.

Jotetsu seemed to waver for a moment, but Shusei repeated, “Come with us. Hakurei is unarmed. You have nothing to worry about,” and Jotetsu too followed them out of the room.



What exactly is Setsu Rimi trying to do?

Hakurei was visibly confused at the so-called xiantang in front of him. Next to the xiantang was the jitang he had tasted earlier. Compared to the jitang, the xiantang seemed rather diluted, and while cloudy, it had a smooth look to it. As she had mixed it with that hot water, it was surely nothing more than a diluted jitang.

And she called this diluted jitang the “special bowl.” This is jitang. How could she hope to prove that the Wakokuan tributes are food ingredients with this? Or does she have something else in mind? Something to further beat me down? I don’t understand...

What was she thinking, and what was she trying to do, as she devised all of this? If her plan had been to expose Hakurei’s misdeed, there had surely been more appropriate ways and places to do that. Being here with the Quinary Dragon as a hostage and forced to share a table with Shohi was nothing but agony. He had never even been face-to-face with Shohi like this.

As a servant, Hakurei had always stood one level lower than Shohi and had

been unable to look at him above his chin when speaking to him. The last time he remembered being at the same eye level as Shohi was over ten years ago when they were children. Back then, when Hakurei was still a young boy, he had been the one to lower his gaze and speak to Shohi.

Hakurei sighed. No matter how much he racked his brain, he couldn't understand. And even if he did, now that the fact that he had stolen the Quinary Dragon had come to light, he would be sentenced either way. With no way of escaping, any amount of thinking was futile.

Regardless of what Rimi is thinking, this is likely to be my last meal.

Jotetsu was present too, and as someone who had served as Shohi's sword since he was young, he would never overlook Hakurei's deed. His arm must have been aching even now to cut him down.

With a frustrated smile at the situation he found himself in, he picked up his spoon.

"I suppose I'll have a taste. It would be a shame to waste it."

Shohi threw Hakurei an annoyed glare, and Hakurei responded with a smile.

"Your Majesty, why don't you have a taste as well? If you try it, I'm sure Rimi will calm down. That way you can apprehend me leisurely and charge me with all the crimes you'd like."

"What do we do about the Quinary Dragon? The very Quinary Dragon that you stole."

"Good question. Why don't you negotiate that with Rimi? I'm to be apprehended, so I have no advice to impart." Hakurei no longer needed to pay his respects as a servant and quickly distanced himself from Shohi with these words.

"I see. So that is how it is, Hakurei. It would seem there is not a single ally of mine here. Rimi swore to return the Quinary Dragon to me if I ate this. Once she does, I shall apprehend you, and sentence that impertinent Rimi as well as Shusei in one fell swoop."

Shohi picked up his spoon and carelessly brought it to his mouth. As he did,

his expression changed.

“What is this?”



The first irritated sip was accompanied by an unexpected taste.

“This is not jitang...” Shohi looked down at his bowl in astonishment. He felt the profound taste of chicken, ginger, and spring onion pass down his throat and land in his stomach. It had a rich, thick, and distinct taste. It was a flavor he had tried many times before, but somehow it tasted even richer. After the rich taste of the chicken, some kind of flavor filled his mouth, removing the fatty aftertaste of the chicken that usually lingered. Instead, a gentle scent enveloped his nose.

Shohi was so surprised that he completely forgot his anger toward Hakurei for a moment.

“But all she did was dilute the jitang with hot water...”

He had seen her do it right in front of him and Hakurei. All she had done was take the jitang and mix it with the completely tasteless hot water made from the Wakokuan ingredients, tang in name only. Yes, the taste had not only not become weaker—an unknown scent had been added, and it had added a profoundness and sharpness to the flavor not present in normal jitang.

Seemingly enticed by Shohi’s voice, Hakurei too brought the spoon to his mouth. After taking a sip, a faint voice escaped his mouth.

“This is...”

Shohi impulsively looked up at Hakurei.

“Can you taste it, Hakurei?”

Hakurei looked up too and nodded.

“I thought she’d just diluted it, but the flavor has actually improved.”

“How?!”

The moment Shohi asked that, he was taken aback by the realization that he was talking naturally to Hakurei. As he hurriedly made a stern face, Hakurei

gave a vague smile in return.

“The answer has to lie in the tang made from those Wakokuan ingredients. It seems to me like the flavor of that tang is enhancing the taste of the jitang.”

Shohi did not want to spend any more time talking to Hakurei, who had stolen the Quinary Dragon and bore a deep malice toward him. However, he could not help himself from asking. He had to know.

“But that was nothing but hot water.”

“No, there was a slight flavor to it.”

“You claim a flavor so faint I could not even sense it could alter the taste of that strong jitang so drastically?”

“Perhaps adding it to an already strong taste is exactly what made the flavor of the Wakokuan tang stand out.”

Hakurei took another sip and nodded.

“If you drop white pigment onto white paper, you can’t make out the color. But if you instead drop it onto something black as night, you will see a turbulent, mist-like pattern. In order to make a taste so delicate it could barely be sensed more prominently, she intentionally added it to something that already had a strong taste,” Hakurei calmly explained.

To Shohi, the tang made from the Wakokuan ingredients had seemed like nothing more than hot water. However, it evidently had held a distinct taste of its own.

Was I simply unable to sense it?

Surprised, he took another sip, and he was hit by a strange sensation. Something new had suddenly, inexplicably, appeared out of nowhere. Shohi could not make sense of it himself.

He looked up to find Hakurei at the opposite end of the table.

Why did Hakurei...

A doubt that had secretly been hiding in Shohi’s chest suddenly rose to the surface, like something invisible that had appeared out of the tang. As if he had

been guided by the warm, pleasant feeling of the xiantang in his stomach.

Why did Hakurei stop at stealing the Quinary Dragon? He had eleven years to prepare for my ascension. Why did he never make a move during that time? If he loathed the thought of my ascension, he could easily have killed me in my sleep. Yet he did not. If he truly loathed me, he would have killed me without a thought for the people or conflict. Yet...

The warmth that filled his stomach suddenly brought out a memory from his past.

“When you become old enough to leave for the outer palace, let’s play together,” Hakurei had said to Shohi. He had whispered because they both knew, even as children, that there was bad blood between Noble Consort En and Virtuous Consort Sai. But any hostilities between their mothers had nothing to do with their children. Or so Hakurei must have thought, otherwise he would not have whispered that. In his words lay hidden the implication that no matter how he felt about Noble Consort En, he still did not hate Shohi.

Then, could it be...?

“Hakurei... Do you truly hate me?” Shohi asked in a weak voice.

Hakurei widened his eyes in surprise at the sudden question. He remained quiet as he observed Shohi for a few moments, before answering with a troubled expression.

“Yes, well... I suppose so. You’re the son of the woman who drove my mother to her death, so it’s impossible for me to like you. So, obviously...”



“Obviously, I hate you,” Hakurei had attempted to say but fell silent, doubtful.

Is that really obvious?

As the unknown warmth of the xiantang spread within him, he remembered something from the past.

It had been common knowledge that Noble Consort En and Virtuous Consort Sai were on bad terms, and those in their vicinity had done their best to prevent their sons from coming face-to-face as well. But sometimes Hakurei would

notice his young half-brother from afar, always seemingly scared of something, and he could not help but feel sorry for him. When they came across each other by chance one day, his young brother had seemed terrified even of him. The sight had been too pitiful for Hakurei to bear, so he had decided to call out to him. At that point, he had not possessed any feelings of animosity towards Shohi.

Those in the vicinity had assumed that—obviously—the two children would be on bad terms as well, but in reality, their parents' relationship was of no concern to them. When Hakurei's mother took her life and he himself became a eunuch, everyone had taken great pains to separate him from Noble Consort En and Shohi.

Hakurei had, without a doubt, hated Noble Consort En. So it was only obvious that he would hate her son Shohi too. Those in his vicinity would also talk about how obvious it was.

But... Was it really obvious?

Shohi had never shown so much as a hint of affection towards his mother. Towards Hakurei he had acted as others had commanded him to. In the face of Shohi suppressing his own feelings as he interacted in the rear palace, did Hakurei truly possess such feelings of resentment towards him?

He did not like him. That much was for certain. But did he really hate him enough to develop a profound resentment for him? If he really did, then it would have been difficult to sit face-to-face with Shohi and have a conversation this calm, Hakurei felt.

Why had Hakurei chosen such a roundabout method as stealing the Quinary Dragon and testing whether Shohi was fit to be emperor? As far as resentment towards Noble Consort En was concerned, he had more seething inside his chest than he knew what to do with. After the Noble Consort's death, only that resentment was left behind, with nowhere to go. That lingering resentment and the frustration that came with it turned into halfhearted resentment towards others. Such was the nature of his halfhearted resentment towards Shohi. Towards the previous emperor. Towards his own dead mother. And towards himself for choosing to stay alive. All feelings of resentment inside him were

halfhearted.

He instinctively brought another spoonful of xiantang to his mouth. That hidden taste seemed to knock on his chest.

“Isn’t there something hidden here?” he felt as though he could hear Setsu Rimi ask.

Something that lives alongside my halfhearted resentment... Something hidden...

Guided by Rimi’s voice, he returned Shohi’s question with one of his own.

“Why did Your Majesty allow me to serve as your personal attendant?”

Shohi looked away.

“Because I did not mind. That is all.”

Shohi seemed hesitant. If he had wished so, he could easily have exiled Hakurei. Yet not only did he not exile him, but he also made him his own personal attendant. He seemed to not fully understand the reason for that himself. Something was hidden deep inside Shohi’s chest too.

Is there something within Shohi as well?

Hakurei sensed something—something even simpler than his own feelings. It was the unadulterated feelings of a scared boy, but at the same time, he wanted to trust him, Hakurei thought.

“Hakurei. After being set free, the Quinary Dragon did not return to me. Will you judge me as unfit to be emperor as a result?”

Hakurei was somewhat troubled at Shohi’s apparent lack of confidence.

“Yes, that is a good question. If the Quinary Dragon had returned to the heavens I would have done so, but instead, it fled to Your Majesty’s own rear palace and became attached to one of Your Majesty’s own concubines, Rimi. In one way it escaped from you, but at the same time, it did not. I’m still not sure what to make of it.”

“You said that you stole the Quinary Dragon so that you could abandon any ill feelings and serve me had I proved myself fit to be emperor. So what will you

do now, under the current circumstances?”

“I’m not sure,” Hakurei responded as he swallowed another spoonful of xiantang. “I’m at my wits’ end. The Quinary Dragon acted in defiance of all my expectations. I will need time to decide.”

“I see. In that case, I too will need time before I can sentence you.”

Hakurei sensed something nostalgic in Shohi’s somehow unreliable, relieved voice. He was reminded of a young Shohi’s gleaming eyes.

The two of them continued eating the xiantang in silence. The taste of it filled their mouths as it fell into their stomachs. Despite how his stomach was filling up, Hakurei did not feel the usual bloated and uncomfortable sensation that accompanied his food.

Ah... Hakurei thought in something akin to a sigh. It tastes good.



Shohi placed one spoonful of the xiantang after another in his mouth. He felt somehow embarrassed and awkward being observed by Hakurei, but as long as he moved his spoon it did not bother him.

Hakurei said he could never like me. However, he did not say that he hated me.

A hint of the mischievous tone with which Hakurei had invited him to play when they were young still remained in his voice. Shohi had simply been unable to sense it until now. Upon finding that hidden whisper, he felt something warm spread in his chest, like a feeling of happiness he had forgotten.

It is like the taste of this xiantang.

It had been there from the start, but Shohi had been unable to sense it. But after being thrown into this confusing situation, he finally had. Something was definitely there.

The strong flavor of chicken, ginger, and spring onion filled his mouth, along with the strange foreign flavor that seemed to further enhance the taste.

It tastes good.

He surprised himself. He was enjoying this taste.

Why?

This xiantang was not a particularly lavish meal. It was a slightly altered version of a taste he had grown up with. Yet for some reason he was enjoying the taste. His tongue had not changed. He felt as though something inside him had slowly melted and shown its true nature, allowing him to find this taste pleasant. Part of him felt relieved. That is how he could enjoy it.

Perhaps it truly is sad.

When Shohi had said that no food could satisfy him, Rimi had found that sad. Shohi now finally understood what she had meant. To not be able to experience this feeling, of enjoying your food, must indeed have been sad.

Shohi had simply said that he did not mind having Hakurei serve by his side. But perhaps he was only, unconsciously, trying to avoid developing a mutual feeling of hatred with the brother who had been kind to him as a child. Even surrounded by countless servants, he must have been so sad and lonely as to try to find this lost bond.

That girl had seen right through the sadness that he had not even been aware of himself.

Setsu Rimi.

Shohi recalled her soft, carefree smile, and gave a smile of his own.

What an impudent woman, he thought. Yet somehow, he felt happy.

III

“I can’t believe this. Just what was that? What are you trying to do, Shusei? You too, Rimi. What exactly are you hoping to get out of the two of them in a situation like that?” Jotetsu complained loudly as he followed Shusei and Rimi. In truth, however, Shusei was also on edge.

“I’d like to ask Rimi that myself,” Shusei interrupted Jotetsu’s complaints as he started speaking with Rimi’s back to him. “So, let me ask you too—what are you planning on doing now? To me, it looks like you stirred the two of them up the best you could, only to then leave them to their own devices. What are you

going to do next?”

Having commanded Shohi and Hakurei to have the xiantang—and it had very much been a command—Rimi had immediately left the room and now walked briskly down the cloisters. Shusei was behind her, and in his overwhelming sense of unease, he reached out and grabbed Rimi’s shoulder. As he did, Rimi suddenly, as if she had failed to endure the impact, began to collapse toward the ground.

“Rimi!”

Startled, Shusei caught Rimi just before her body touched the ground and held her up. Rimi let out a light moan as she clung to Shusei’s arm.

“Oh... I’m sorry...the tension just left my body all at once. My legs are trembling...” Rimi let out a small laugh.

“You were tense? You seemed to have no qualms bossing the two of them around in there. I’m sorry to have to ask you this in your current condition, but what are you planning on doing now?” Shusei gently prompted her again.

“The truth is, there’s nothing I *can* do now.”

Rimi smiled while on the verge of tears.

“What?!” Jotetsu replied in utter bafflement.

“All I can do is trust in what I believe. If I fail at pulling out what is hidden deep within the two, I will be beheaded by His Majesty shortly. Hakurei will be deemed a criminal and executed. Tama, however, will probably return to the heavens,” Rimi replied apologetically.

“Was that the full extent of your plan?” Shusei asked.

“Yes,” Rimi replied with a nod.

“That’s a terribly risky wager. I suppose I’m not much better for going along with it, though.”

Shusei was past the point of astonishment, instead smiling as though he was about to go mad.

“What are you talking about, Rimi? Shusei?” Jotetsu asked as he looked from

one to the other.

“Rimi believes there exists a familial bond between His Majesty and Hakurei. Brotherly love,” Shusei explained to the bewildered Jotetsu.

“Love? Give me a break. You do realize who you’re talking about? That’s out of the question. Those two obviously feel nothing but hatred for each other.”

“That’s not obvious,” Shusei replied.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Then let me ask you, Jotetsu. Why is it that both of their actions have been so halfhearted?”

Jotetsu opened his mouth in an attempt to argue back, but something seemed to come to mind as he closed his mouth again.

“That’s not possible...” Jotetsu mumbled to himself.

“But that very possibility is what Rimi believes in, which I went along with.”

Shusei turned toward the room beyond the cloister and prayed for Shohi and Hakurei to notice that barely perceptible thread. All of the strange actions on the part of Hakurei and Shohi could only be explained if they both had feelings of compassion and love toward each other, if only faintly. But both of them were too caught up in their assumptions that they obviously hated each other to notice that thin thread.

“It’s not obvious at all,” Rimi had said. She had given them the chance to notice what could not be seen. That was the reason behind that half-baked ceremony. She had squeezed every fact she could out of them, made them sit face-to-face when they normally never would, and directed them to examine each other. She had then served the xiantang to help them find the imperceptible.

The “xian” of xiantang meant to lay bare what could not be seen. It was only a name, but there is power in a name, and a name bestows power unto that which bears it. Rimi had named the dish with that in mind.

This woman is a shrine maiden of food, an immortal, and a scholar. What an extraordinary individual. With her insight, my cuisinology may end up

developing in unexpected directions, Shusei thought as he felt new possibilities for his research unfolding.

Jotetsu shrugged his shoulders as if to signal he was giving up.

“You sure have guts, the both of you.”

“I would say we have a fifty-fifty chance of winning the bet. However, Rimi...” Shusei readjusted his hold on Rimi and reassured her. “Even if your plan fails, I will protect your head. As a cuisinologist, I find the dish you served His Majesty terribly fascinating.”

“Thank you, Master Shusei.”

The Quinary Dragon on Rimi’s shoulder let out a high-pitched squeak and spun Rimi’s hair around herself.

“Thank you too, Tama. I’m sorry for making you help us like this,” Rimi said.

Jotetsu sighed at the sight of the Quinary Dragon rubbing her cheeks against Rimi.

“So then, Rimi and Shusei. What are you going to do about that Quinary Dragon?”

“I’d like to return it to His Majesty, of course. But...Tama, will you go back to His Majesty?”

But just as she asked, Rimi let out a quick scream as the Quinary Dragon once again dove into her skirt.

“It...seems she doesn’t want to go back. Now what do we do?” Rimi spoke pitifully as she borrowed Shusei’s arm to stand up properly.

Shusei could do nothing but respond with a concerned expression.

“Well, let’s take our time figuring something out,” Shusei responded.

“Yes, you’re right. But for now, we need to return to His Majesty and Master Hakurei soon,” Rimi said.



If Tama refused to return to Shohi, would Rimi be executed regardless of how things turned out? But if Rimi was killed, Tama would fly off to the heavens. In

other words, Shohi could not simply kill Rimi haphazardly, she thought optimistically as she walked toward the room where Shohi and Hakurei were waiting. She was beyond herself with worry over the outcome.

Shusei's presence, however, was reassuring. He had promised to protect Rimi's head no matter what happened. He was the only one she had met in Konkoku who had cared for her like this. And he trusted Rimi. Shusei had believed in the thin thread that connected Hakurei and Shohi. For the sake of both herself and the man who trusted her, she needed them to be satisfied.

As she passed through the doorway into the quiet room, she found the two of them sitting like before, facing each other above the floor divided into black and white. Rimi turned her gaze to what was placed in front of them.

As she did, a broad smile appeared on her face, and she asked the two of them a question.

"Your Majesty, Master Hakurei, how did you find the xiantang?"

The bowls of xiantang in front of them were empty.

"It was great, Rimi," Hakurei responded with a face much healthier-looking than before,

"It...tasted good," Shohi responded sternly.

Rimi smiled gently upon hearing Shohi's answer.

That was exactly what I've been wanting to hear.

There was nothing at all actually special about the xiantang Rimi had made. But to properly enjoy a meal, your state of mind was important. Just as Rimi had been unable to taste anything after joining the rear palace, Hakurei had always felt as though his stomach was heavy, and as a result, he had no appetite, while Shohi had never even been satisfied by a meal over the course of his entire life. That was a result of their upset minds. The fact that they were now able to feel satisfied by their food must have been because they had sensed something between each other. Rimi's plan had succeeded.

"I'm so happy that you're satisfied with it. That was just what I was hoping to hear. That was all I needed."

Rimi smiled even broader out of happiness and relief, but as she did, she experienced a sensation like her consciousness suddenly leaving her. The drastic change from extreme tension to a liberating sense of relief and happiness made her pass out.

She could hear Shusei as well as Shohi, Hakurei, and Jotetsu calling her name somewhere off in the distance. She still had a lot to worry about, like what to do with Tama, but right now, she was truly happy from the bottom of her heart.



Just before her consciousness faded completely, she felt as though she could hear her Saigu sister's voice.

"Excellent, my Umashi-no-Miya."

Lady Saigu, I think I may be able to find a place of my own here, Rimi responded in her mind.



"Talk about a change in attitude, Your Majesty," Shusei spoke to Shohi, who had just returned to his room after a council meeting, with a partially astounded look on his face.

"Rimi managed to satisfy me. The Wakokuan tributes are without a doubt food ingredients."

"Well, that *is* true..."

One day had passed since Shohi had a taste of the xiantang. During the council meeting that had just ended, he had declared that the tributes from Wakoku were marvelous food ingredients that would prove beneficial to Konkoku. Furthermore, he stated that Konkoku was to send a polite letter of gratitude to Wakoku.

Rimi had indeed proved that the tributes were food. However, only eight days prior, Shohi had ordered to have Rimi beheaded and her head brined. So not only Shusei but also the ministers of Personnel and Rites had been surprised and astounded by the turn of events.

Well, it just goes to show how much he liked the xiantang. That did make Shusei happy.

"Now, Your Majesty, what will you do about Hakurei?"

"Nothing in particular. Hakurei may have released the Quinary Dragon, but in the end, it stayed here in the palace along with Rimi, so there is no problem," Shohi responded calmly.

After Rimi had woken up again, she had attempted to persuade the Quinary Dragon to return to Shohi, but no matter how hard she tried, she had refused to leave her side. When Shusei had quietly suggested to Jotetsu to call for priests

and have them capture it, it had even bitten him and stared at him with a menacing glare that seemed to threaten it would fly away if he so much as attempted to call a priest. In the end, the Quinary Dragon had remained in the rear palace with Rimi. For the time being, it seemed Rimi had no choice but to take care of it.

“But Hakurei did still steal the Quinary Dragon. Are you planning to forgive him for that?” Jotetsu asked from the window sill.

“Hakurei said he would continue to serve me as long as the Quinary Dragon did not fully leave my side. I sensed no insincerity behind his words.”

“Even so, do you plan on just overlooking his crimes?” Jotetsu spat back.

“I do not consider putting me to the test a crime,” Shohi replied.

“You mean you’ll even welcome his attempt at testing your suitability as emperor?” Jotetsu questioned.

“I ascended to the throne in place of my unfortunate brother. The least I can do is prove myself.”

Shohi looked out through the open window at the trees growing in the garden outside. On the branches of the maple trees, new leaves had begun to bud. Shusei was shocked by what Shohi had just said.

I had thought His Majesty was much more stubborn.

He observed Shohi’s young, slender back. His Majesty tended to make cruel remarks and commit vicious actions, and his short-tempered nature had been with him since he was young. However, something lay hidden deep inside his chest. Upon closer reflection, Shohi did have a genuine side to him too.

I may have had the wrong idea about him. His Majesty is more open-minded than I thought.

What brought out Shohi’s open-mindedness must have been Rimi’s xiantang.

Under this emperor, perhaps even Hakurei can become one of his trusted retainers.

Jotetsu said nothing more and sleepily turned his half-opened eyes toward the floor.

“Incidentally, what is Rimi doing?” Shohi asked as if it had suddenly crossed his mind.

“Before the council, I called for a handmaid and asked about her. Apparently, Noble Consort So was overjoyed that Rimi had returned to the rear palace,” Shusei replied.

“Noble Consort So? Oh, that simpleton.”

“I’m told Noble Consort So went to the Palace of Small Wings herself to pay her respects. Although she then apparently begged Rimi for some kaorizuke—Wakokuan food that is good for your skin. Rimi was supposedly amused. Noble Consort So, being so forthright about her desires and feelings, was endearing in comparison to Your Majesty and Hakurei, or so I’m told,” Shusei said with a smile.

Shohi frowned at having been told indirectly that he was not endearing.

“However, even if the Quinary Dragon does not leave Rimi’s side, is it truly a good idea to leave things as they are? Shusei, what are your thoughts?”

“Leaving a divine beast that serves as a cornerstone of the country as the pet of a mere palace woman of the rear palace does seem rather unwise.”

At a loss, Shusei too furrowed his brow. He then noticed Shohi’s cold breakfast, which had been left upon a chair.

“Your Majesty, I see you haven’t touched your breakfast. As I was unable to prepare breakfast for you yesterday, I had them substitute it with what was supposed to be your supper for today. It has the effect of increasing your spiritual power. If you want the Quinary Dragon to become attached to you, I recommend you proactively eat foods such as this.”

“Shusei, there is something I have been meaning to tell you for a while. The dishes you make based on your cuisinology research are all disgusting and not fit for human consumption. I am never again putting something that disgusting in my mouth.”

“But, Your Majesty, I only choose the ingredients based on what I believe you need. The meal itself is prepared by the cooks to ensure that the taste is—”

“Then you should first teach the cooks how to turn fish eyeballs and strange mushrooms that taste like mold and look like human faces into something edible before asking me to eat it again! I am going for a walk.”

Shohi abruptly left the room as an astonished Shusei saw him off, and Jotetsu started chuckling.

“Looks like His Majesty’s finally gonna get some proper food to eat. You should be sorry, Shusei. Your loyalty ended up being indistinguishable from harassment as far as His Majesty is concerned.”

Shusei looked down at Shohi’s abandoned cold breakfast and gave a frustrated smile.

“Yes, I guess so. Rimi’s tang is the first meal I’ve seen His Majesty finish and be satisfied.”

Shusei then had a sudden realization.

His Majesty is letting Rimi walk free. However, he was still concerned about her.

That was new for Shohi. Before, he would never have taken such lenient measures. He would have restricted her freedom and put her under surveillance, effectively imprisoning her. But now, he was allowing her freedom, and even seemed to be worrying about her.

“Don’t tell me His Majesty has feelings for...” Shusei said jokingly, but he quickly started feeling as though that might actually be the case, and the thought frightened him.

Jotetsu stood up from the window and started walking toward the exit.

“You noticed, huh? I’m positive His Majesty has some kind of special feeling for Rimi,” Jotetsu said with his back to Shusei before exiting the room.

Shusei turned pale.

Will Rimi belong to His Majesty one day, then?

However, the more collected part of himself quickly corrected him.

What are you talking about? She is one of the concubines of the rear palace.

She already belongs to him.

Shusei's chest felt tight at the realization, and he closed his eyes.

"What...is wrong with me? What am I thinking?"

Shusei tried to stifle any foolish thoughts in his mind. Still, he felt a pain in his chest. This fact surprised even himself—the supposed Loveless Scholar.

A few days later, Shohi called Shusei to him. Seemingly uneasy about leaving the Quinary Dragon as the pet of a palace woman in the rear palace, he informed Shusei of a certain plan he had devised.



A few days had passed since the events at the Palace of the Water Spirit. Having returned to the rear palace, Rimi woke up to the scent of hot congee.

"What a warm fragrance...and I smell something fried too... If I tore it into small pieces and mixed it with the congee, I'm sure it would add a faintly sweet, rich taste to it..."

Rimi smirked to herself and picked up Tama as she climbed out of bed with bed head and drowsy eyes. She sleepily walked into her living room, only to find someone unexpected.

"Finally awake, Rimi?"

On a sofa in the living room, a beauty far too provocative for early in the morning was sitting, relaxed. Rimi let out a small scream in surprise, at which Tama fled into the bedroom.

"M-Master Hakurei... What are you doing here so early in the morning?"

"You don't have to look so disgruntled now, do you? Don't worry about me and enjoy your breakfast," Hakurei replied with a sly grin.

"How could I not worry about such a stunningly beautiful person watching me from behind?" Rimi gasped.

"Would you prefer if I moved in front of you, then?" Hakurei said while he got up.

Rimi sat down in her chair in front of the breakfast congee, which Hakurei

skillfully poured into a bowl and presented to Rimi.

“Here you go.”

Oh, I shouldn't have said that... It's even worse to have him right in front of me...

With such a captivating beauty in front of her, Rimi found it difficult to get started on her breakfast.

“Um... What are you doing here, Master Hakurei? Are you here to harass me or something?”

“Not at all. I have something to tell you. Well, we can talk about that later. Enjoy your breakfast first.”

“Instead of just sitting there, why don't you have some too, Master Hakurei?”

“If you insist,” Hakurei said as he smiled at the invitation and fetched another bowl.

Hakurei had been looking a bit less pale lately. Seeing this made Rimi happy.

Alongside the congee on the table were plates of deep-fried dough snacks and spring melon kaorizuke. Rimi invited Hakurei to have some along with the congee as she picked up her spoon.

“Have you been getting along well with His Majesty lately?” Rimi asked.

“I wouldn't say that. Nothing has really changed. We both act as if nothing happened,” Hakurei responded with a smile as he tasted the congee. “Well, I'll be taking my time assessing His Majesty's capability. I'm sure he plans to do the same.”

“It's very strange how you're not steeped in hatred, Master Hakurei. No one could have faulted you for hating him so much that you would lose yourself to your resentment and want to kill him.”

On the one hand, for Shohi, his feelings of guilt and fear were probably far stronger than any hatred he had for Hakurei. Perhaps feelings of love remain somewhere deep inside him. For Hakurei, on the other hand, it would only have been natural for strong, pitch-black feelings of hatred and rage to be seething within him. Why had he not lost himself to such dark emotions? Why was there

still a faint thread of love inside him?

“It’s probably because I chose it for myself. To live.”

Hakurei looked into Rimi’s face as he continued eating. His gaze seemed distant, as if he was looking at someone else far behind Rimi.

“When my mother took her life, she made me choose. She said that she had to die to prove her innocence and asked what I would do—die together with her or live on. She said that if I chose to live, I would have to suffer humiliation far too great for a person to bear.”

When Virtuous Consort Sai died, Hakurei was only eleven years of age. *Just how cornered must his mother have felt to force such a decision onto a mere child*, Rimi wondered. His mother probably had no choice to begin with.

“I said that I wanted to live, no matter what happened. Hearing that, my mother nodded and said that if I were to live, I needed to be prepared for whatever might come my way. So I suppose that no matter what happened, part of me had already steeled myself. Even if I might not be able to come to terms with everything, I could accept it as unavoidable.”

Rimi turned her gaze down.

There are no words of comfort that I could give him.

He had been forced to live out his life with a wounded body and mind. For him to not have been overcome with dark emotions, and for a faint thread of love to remain in his heart, was a miracle. It must have been in large part thanks to his own innate nature. Had things turned out differently, he could have become an exceptionally compassionate emperor.

“Perhaps the reason I set the Quinary Dragon free was to give myself an excuse. An excuse for not hating the son of the woman who drove my mother to her death from the bottom of my heart, allowing me to serve him. I wanted to be able to tell myself that the Quinary Dragon chose His Majesty, and that’s why I serve him. And had the Quinary Dragon instead escaped to the heavens, I could have used that as an excuse to leave His Majesty’s side. That too would have been a weight off my shoulders.”

Unable to find the words to console him, Rimi softly pushed the plate of

kaorizuke toward Hakurei.

“Please, have more. I want to see you even healthier, Master Hakurei.”

“Rimi...”

As Rimi turned her gaze up upon hearing her name spoken gently, Hakurei reached out and touched her chin.

“You have some batter on your chin.”

“Huh?”

Hakurei removed the piece of batter with his fingers and put it in his mouth before standing up from his chair.

“Thank you for the congee, Rimi. Please accept my sincere apologies for what I did to you at the Palace of the Water Spirit. Now, I’ll be going. See you, Rimi.”

“W-Wait, Master Hakurei! Didn’t you have something to tell me?”

Hakurei glanced toward the cloister outside and shrugged.

“I don’t need to. It seems he’s already here anyway. Bye.”

Just as Hakurei left the room, Rimi’s old handmaid rushed in to take his place with a frantic expression on her face.

“It’s urgent, Lady Rimi! His Majesty! His Majesty is here!”

“His Majesty? Surely not. He’s not the kind of charming person to come to the rear palace to see a woman this early in the morning. And we’re in the furthest outskirts of the rear—”

As Rimi was about to let out a chuckle, her smile froze over. Behind the old handmaid appeared a beautiful face that she had viewed enough times for a lifetime in the Palace of the Water Spirit—it was the emperor.

“Y-Your Majesty...!”

This must have been what Hakurei had come to announce: that Shohi would be paying her a visit.

“I see you look awfully ugly in the mornings, Setsu Rimi.”

Rimi’s face twitched at Shohi’s rude greeting. She had made it through the

ordeal a few days prior—Shohi had recognized and pardoned her. Even so, Rimi did not want to spend any more time with this sadistic emperor than she had to.

“Wh-What is Your Majesty doing here?” Rimi asked with a nervous half-smile when Shohi suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her up from her chair.

“Come. I will make you a Noble Consort.”

“P-Pardon?”

From behind her, Rimi heard her elated handmaid shout, “Lady Rimi! I can’t believe it! His Majesty touched you!” Rimi herself, however, had only just woken up and was unable to process the situation. Shohi dragged her through the inner gate, then the outer gate, all the way to the emperor’s own quarters. There they found Shusei waiting. He seemed to take pity on Rimi, who had clearly been brought there out of the blue against her own will.

“I have brought her here, Shusei. Give the order to the Department of Service. Tell them to make Setsu Rimi a Noble Consort, and Noble Consort So a Lady of Precious Bevy.”

Make Setsu Rimi a Noble Consort... So he’s making me into a Noble Consort? And Noble Consort So into a Lady of Precious Bevy, a palace woman? I see... Hmm... Wait, what?!

The moment Rimi understood what Shohi was saying, she let out a scream and backed up against the wall.

“Wh-Wh-What did you just say, Your Majesty?! It sounded to me as if your esteemed self just deliciously imparted the most ridiculous nonsense I have ever heard!”

“That is not polite language, Rimi,” Shusei cautioned Rimi with a troubled expression before explaining the situation. “Calm down, Rimi. You are, after all, currently in possession of the Quinary Dragon, so His Majesty wants to raise your rank to Noble Consort. As the guardian of a divine beast, that is probably appropriate.”

“I wholeheartedly refuse.”

Shohi furrowed his brow at Rimi's immediate refusal.

"You mean to say you despise the idea of being my Noble Consort? You do realize that this is, in part, meant to be a reward?"

"That's not what I mean. Your Majesty already has a Noble Consort, So. I am a simple palace woman, who has only just started to get used to life in the rear palace. If something so outrageous were to happen now, I would end up having a hard time yet again."

"That is of no concern to me."

"No ounce of empath—no, uh, I mean... Didn't you say you wished for the rear palace to be operated smoothly and free of conflict? If you do this, it won't end with simple conflict!"

"Then ensure that does not happen yourself."

"You can't be serious...!" Rimi said in a pitiful voice at the outrageous request.

Rimi frantically searched the room with her gaze for a savior and made eye contact with Shusei—the one and only person who might come to Rimi's aid.

Master Shusei! Please, don't you have any solution for this?! She desperately pleaded to the finest scholar of Konkoku with her eyes.

Shusei seemed to notice, and at first made a troubled face that seemed to say "I can't." However, he quickly succumbed to Rimi's desperate gaze. He furrowed his brow as he racked his brain for a moment, before looking up as if he had come up with something.

"Your Majesty, what about this? In order to ensure your peace of mind, Rimi could report to you every day together with the Quinary Dragon. That way you would be able to rest easy."

"As if a palace woman of the rear palace could simply leave for the outer palace as she wishes for no explicit purpose."

Shusei nodded in agreement with Shohi's sound argument.

"Indeed. So we simply need to grant her a duty that would allow her to regularly visit the outer palace. As long as Rimi is fine with it, I would like for her to be my assistant for my cuisinology research. That way no one would suspect

her even if she left the rear palace every day.”

“Your cuisinology assistant?!” Rimi became wide-eyed at the stunning proposal.

Cuisinology...assistant, as in helper? I'll get to help him with his scientific research?

Science was a matter for men. As a woman, Rimi had never even considered the possibility of practicing it. However, food was the main pillar that supported Rimi, and the thought of being able to help out with research of food made her happy beyond belief.

“But would I really be capable of helping you?”

“The xiantang that you served His Majesty proved the importance of not just the food, but also how it's consumed. You would be able to contribute to the development of cuisinology by approaching it from a different angle than me. I'm confident you have that in you. That's why I want you as a fellow scholar. Are you against the idea?”

“Of course not! I...I too want to pursue cuisinology, learn more about food, and make as many people as I can—including His Majesty—satisfied with my food!”

Hearing Rimi's response, Shusei turned to Shohi.

“There you have it, Your Majesty. What do you think?”

“Is that really all you want?”

Rimi nodded fervently at the dubious Shohi.

“Yes, it is. That's exactly what I want.”

“Very well, I shall permit it.”

Rimi widened her eyes in amazement at how easily and nonchalantly she was given permission. Shusei also seemed surprised.

“You approved awfully easily, Your Majesty. Are you really sure?”

“I am. You have my permission. As long as you show me that dumbstruck face of yours every day, I do not care,” Shohi confirmed.

“I will visit Your Majesty every day without fail. I swear,” Rimi replied wholeheartedly.

“Then we are done here,” Shohi concluded.

Shusei smiled upon hearing Shohi’s response. He then called Rimi’s name and held out his hand.

“I welcome you as a fellow scholar. I look forward to working together with you,” Shusei said with confidence.

“Th-Thank you!”

Her cheeks red from joy at the unexpected development, Rimi took Shusei’s hand. His warm palm reminded her of how he had been kind to her ever since she first arrived. And he had made a place for Rimi right by his side.

Together...

That word made her happy. It felt like he was implicitly saying that there was a purpose to her being by his side.

Together with Master Shusei...

She looked at the kindest scholar in Konkoku with watery eyes. He looked back at Rimi with an awkward, slightly embarrassed smile. The two of them had yet to learn the name of the warmth they felt through each other’s hands.

As the late spring blossoms fell, the season of blinding fresh greenery drew near. The foreign wildflower that had been sent to the rear palace of Konkoku was now searching for a place to fully bloom.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. And to my new readers, it's nice to meet you. This is Miri Mikawa.

This story is what you might call a China-inspired fantasy adventure, and it's my first China-inspired story to be published in book form. I incorporated all kinds of things, both real and fiction, as I sketched the setting of the story. The tale is centered around a "pickling girl who's chronically carefree" and an "absentmindedly aroused scholar," a pair that might seem a little lacking in the romance department at first glance. Writing a story in a completely new world like this was a very novel and fun experience.

To the editor: Thank you for always being so cheerful. I always enjoy talking to you. I can't thank you enough for all your wise criticism of my writing. I look forward to working more with you.

To Kasumi Nagi who drew the illustrations: Thank you so much. I endeavored to write a draft worthy of your beautiful and cute drawings. I am so happy that you're drawing this series.

Finally, to my readers: Thank you for reading this book. I hope you'll excuse the advertisement, but one month after the release of this book (July 25, 2016), the second volume of another series of mine, *This Is the Kagurazaka House*, will be released by Kadokawa Bunko. If you're interested, I would be delighted if you would read that as well.

There you have it, my first China-inspired book. I think it's well worth a read even if just for Nagi's drawings, but I hope you enjoy the story as well.

Miri Mikawa



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Culinary Chronicles of the Court Flower: Volume 1

by Miri Mikawa

Translated by afm Edited by Nicole D'Andria

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2021